
Article

Reconciling Voices in Writing an Autoethnographic Thesis

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Abstract

The authors consider writing and supervising an autoethnographic thesis as a process of reconciling voices while finding one's own academic and personal voice. They draw from notions of polyphony to speak about how we negotiated with different voices (the voices of experts, research participants, personal affiliations, those used in our supervisory discussions) our way forward in the supervisory relationship, as well as in the thesis itself. They invite readers to draw their own meanings from these negotiations as they can relate to supervisory relationships and the writing of academic theses.

Keywords: autoethnography, master's degree, academic supervision, voice

Authors' note: This article is based on our presentation to the Banff Advances in Qualitative Methods conference. We acknowledge Cecile de Vries and Allison Foskett for their support and contributions during the course of the writing of Dawn's thesis. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Tom Strong, Associate Professor, Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, e-mail strongt@ucalgary.ca.

Introduction

This is our story about recognizing, negotiating, and coordinating a diverse range of voices, including our own, to write Dawn's successfully defended master's thesis. Dawn's autoethnographic thesis was on finding spirituality after leaving the Catholic Church, a challenge, she recognized, that she shared with others. For Tom, being asked by Dawn to supervise an autoethnography thesis was a new academic adventure but one he wanted to be sure culminated in a thesis Dawn felt good about and that would be defensible at thesis examination time. Behind us lined up a number of "voices" that we would have to contend with for Dawn to create a personally meaningful thesis that met the rigors of academic scrutiny.

Dawn's research challenge was an autoethnography that could be seen as being about finding her spiritual voice. In this regard, Dawn had her prior experience, the cultural experiences related to her topic, a growing psychological and personal development literature, and the voices of her co-researchers (Dawn consulted others consenting to speak to her topic) to inform her research journey. Seen another way, these were voices speaking to Dawn as she found ways to honor them yet still "people" them with her own intentions, to use a Bakhtin (1984) phrase. This was no mere academic exercise, however; Dawn's challenge was to speak (if writing can be seen as a form of speech) with both academic and personal authority on her still-evolving spiritual experience.

We should say a bit more about what we mean by "voice." Voice, as we are using the term, refers to the possible articulations that can be given to any experience. On an individual level, this can mean conflicting discourses one might use (e.g., spiritual or psychological discourse). This extends to a social or cultural level as one potentially interacts with other voices also engaged in articulating the same experience. In the case of Dawn's autoethnography, this involved Dawn's different and sometimes conflicting voices as well as the voices of people she interacted with in completing her thesis (her research participants, Tom as her supervisor, friends, her examining committee, and so on). Out of the interplay and eventual reconciliation of these voices came the document that would serve as Dawn's master's thesis. Our writing here speaks to this process.

Our overlap in interests came partly because of our being in a counseling psychology graduate program. Dawn had an intriguing research question, and Tom's research relates largely to the collaborative and generative possibilities of dialogue. This brought him to thinkers like Bakhtin (1981, 1984; Morson & Emerson, 1990), Wittgenstein (1958), and Foucault (1972), for whom meaning and action related to participating in forms of dialogue. Dawn, in leaving the Catholic Church, felt strong spiritual yearnings but had yet to find the kind of meaning and voice to articulate them. Bakhtin (1981) had partly focused on how voices could come together, in a dialogic ethics (Strong & Sutherland, 2007) to avoid conflicting or dominant monologues while being enriched by the interplay of voices. There is a common asymmetry to student-supervisor dialogues (Aguinis, Nesler, Quigley, Lee, & Tedeschi, 1996): Tom was to mentor Dawn, but Dawn's topic and Tom's dialogic ethics called for special considerations of voice and voicing, particularly in the meaning-making process they would undertake together.

Bakhtin (1981) saw such acts of meaning-making as "intertextual," in that others' meanings influence the words we use and the results often reflect a hybrid of texts or meanings we consult. Each voice Dawn consulted as she wrote had his or her own ideas and purposes, often with an authority accorded them by others, but so did the people to whom she would relate her research narrative: her thesis evaluators. Out of this polyphony of voices (think of a cacophonous marching band of voices instead of musical instruments, all metaphorically marching to different drummers) was a "heteroglossic" challenge of creating meaning that fit her purposes and those of the academic exercise. The broader notion that such meaning-making plays out in a historically

and contextually situated way was what Bakhtin referred to as a “chronotope,” the unique context that shapes one’s thinking, purposes, and conversations. We are borrowing Bakhtin’s words and ideas here because he spoke to meaning-making as something occurring in and from dialogic interactions in ways that reflect time, place, and the voices we engage with as we go.

Our Bakhtinian focus as it relates to autoethnography is a bit different from that taken up by another supervisee/supervisor pair (Chawla & Rawlins, 2004). Their exchanges around Chawla’s autoethnography dissertation process were focused on the development of her dissertation and their relationship. Our focus here is to look more specifically at what reconciling voices entails while developing one’s (i.e., Dawn’s) voice on a sensitive topic. We speak to the reconciliation, paraphrasing Bakhtin (1981), for whom any dialogue and dialogically created documents are “half mine.” By engaging in and anticipating many dialogues, including our own, Dawn’s process involved reconciling with a lot of voices to articulate her autoethnographic voice.

Tom contended with some of his own voices: ensuring that Dawn had a thesis that would be well received by his academic colleagues, drawing from the theoretical voices informing his aesthetic and ethical stance, and finding ways to use his supervisory voice in ways that would contribute to Dawn’s and in ways that culminated in a satisfying thesis. This occurred at a time when voice problems played out literally for Tom—a combination of overwork, painful postural problems, and a soul-searching time in crossing the tenure hurdle—in a diagnosis by an ear, nose, and throat specialist (spasmodic dysphonia), but this was Dawn’s personal journey into an important dimension of her life where she felt voiceless. A discourse analyst concerned with how clients and therapists put words to “delicate objects” such as “identity” (Silverman, 2004; Strong & Zeman, 2006), Dawn’s thesis was a chance for Tom to “walk his talk.”

We want to share the process that led to Dawn’s thesis by speaking to how we contended with all of these different voices as we talked our way forward in our supervisory relationship. We found useful ideas in adapting this voicing metaphor to our interactions and those involved in conducting the research. From our social constructionist approach we see meaning as something negotiated through such interactions, but how these negotiations occurred was something that took place on a couple of fronts: we with the voices informing “where we were coming from” and we in our negotiations with each other. In this respect, we want to chronicle highlights from these negotiations and what came from them. We will do this by keeping Dawn’s conversational and thesis journey (finding spirituality outside the Catholic Church) at the forefront, and we will deploy a mix of our afterthoughts and e-mails between us from that journey as we go.

Starting our research dialogue

Dawn recognized her struggles with spirituality 10 years ago but, not knowing what to do with them, put them on the back burner. However, inching their way to the forefront, these struggles slowly reemerged to face Dawn head on during the first year of her master’s program. Unsure of how to approach her spirituality, she was tempted to stuff it back down until she realized that it could actually be a topic of study for her. She delayed approaching potential supervisors, hoping that spiritual development, the topic she felt had chosen her, would fall aside and allow room for her to choose a different subject. Her struggles with spirituality were certainly important to her, but she was unsure that they were something she felt ready or adequate to write about. Nonetheless, they persisted, almost beckoning her to write about them, so she began looking for a supervisor.

Having been Tom's research assistant, Dawn knew his hectic schedule and had a lot of respect for his work and academic skill. She was tentative in approaching Tom and filled with self-doubt. She did not know if the topic was worthy of academic study and was concerned about using autoethnography, which did not seem to have a strong history in academic research. The only thing she felt confident about was that Tom would say his plate was too full to take on supervising her thesis as well. Fortunately, however, Tom pleasantly surprised her and actually showed interest in both her topic and the method. To be honest, Dawn had really mostly surprised herself that she had something worth pursuing and someone who was willing to pursue it with her. Using autoethnography was something Dawn was as reluctant to do as she was to write about her topic, but the two seemed to go hand in hand.

Dawn came to Tom with an interest in two things that would take him new places: an interest in autoethnography and an interest in spirituality (Tom had been only a dabbler since refusing to attend Sunday school himself at age 13). Although Tom professed collaboration and "not knowing" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Strong, 2002) in his writing on therapy, he wondered what he could offer Dawn. Autoethnography is a diverse research approach with ambiguous aims, and Tom had encountered considerable snobbery about qualitative research methods, let alone the "loosey-goosey" stuff associated with autoethnography. On spirituality, Tom was at an odd place in his life, being both intrigued and wary. His stereotypes were abundant. Wariness about submitting to religious dogmas ran alongside recognizing the considerable peace and sense of inclusion some find in spiritual communities and practices. In his own dabblings, Tom had gone down Buddhist paths but only so far, with his favorite book from that era being *Ambivalent Zen* (Shainberg, 1997). The New Age stuff seemed bizarre, too, particularly the parts about individual seekers on individual paths, with little ability to share their yearnings, struggles, and joys. Dawn's research offered some further vicarious dabbling in spiritual questions at a time when Tom was burned out yet open to how people make sense of their spiritual yearnings. We both thought Dawn was on to something worthwhile committing ourselves to. Thus began our conversational research journey.

Our supervisory dialogues

Talking our way forward on Dawn's thesis was a good experience, but it had some awkward and frustrating times, too. To read about others' experiences in supervision, however, the experience can be quite varied; sometimes it seemed to be enough for students to feel that they had to ventriloquate their supervisors' voices, or worse. Informally, Tom heard supervisors sometimes speak of supervisees in terms of "high or low maintenance." Furthermore, conversational impasses in the supervisory relationship can be a primary reason why graduate students do not complete their degrees (Latimer, 2005). In taking each other on, we knew that there would be potential challenges and benefits. We will now get more specific about our supervision discussions as these related to writing Dawn's thesis.

(Dawn) In a provocatively titled article, Grant (2005) offered a cynical view of supervision dynamics. My experience of supervision was not one of "forming a terrain of uncertainty which the student dares not speak of and the supervisor cares not to" (p. 344). This might be due to personality differences between me and Grant or a different experience of the supervisory relationship, but I never felt that Tom was talking over me; instead, he was encouraging me to talk. Tom was struggling to get me to speak rather than fighting to speak over me. This different experience might also be attributable to the different methods that Grant and I employed.

(Tom) I felt several tugs in what Dawn was saying, sometimes feeling as if her topic involved a struggle of a sensitive and personal nature while sensing that she sought normal reassurance and guidance to move her thesis forward. If this was Dawn's research journey out of seeming voicelessness, it was also a journey out of dissatisfactions with authoritarian religion, with relationship dynamics I did not want to replicate. But I also was mindful of Dawn's having a defensible thesis using a seldom-used research method that I was not fully confident about. How to keep Dawn's thesis her story while meeting the academic requirements for graduate theses at their university was part of my challenge. But it was more than a story that Dawn had embarked on; she was looking for important answers to her life predicament.

(Dawn and Tom) The conversation started with us both knowing that Dawn wanted to explore her spiritual identity and how it was that she was experiencing it outside of the Catholic Church, where she had grown up. We also knew that Dawn wanted to do this in such a way that she was able to connect with the experiences of others and present them in a way that honored their stories as they told them rather than reducing them to themes.

(Dawn) I sought help to see my story in new ways, and Tom began discussing the various cultural discourses (e.g., Gee, 2005) that could be informing my story. The notion that cultural discourses gave voice to some accounts and approaches to spirituality, that there was no single account or approach I would need to buy into, was liberating and confusing. Some confusing parts came with discursively unpacking my own story, considering differences found in the literatures I consulted, and listening for the discourses used by my participants. I needed to start with questions to ask potential co-researchers to draw out their stories. But what questions to ask, and what questions had I asked myself thus far? With the notion of differences in discourse broadening my perspective, I began to explore the different ways in which the church, my family and friends, and my sense of self had all influenced where I was then spiritually situated. This was my first taste of really having to explore my experiences and find my own voice to express them. In a question form I hoped to connect with others, and all I could do was hope that I was asking the right questions.

(Tom) Alongside these more pragmatic conversations about interviews and what to ask, I wondered how much Dawn might benefit from my theoretical preferences. Was suggesting that Dawn consider the big picture ideas of Bakhtin (1981), Wittgenstein (1958), and Foucault (1972) when she was grappling with more basic things like spiritual beliefs, like wondering about questions to ask in her interviews, or questions from her own reading, reasonable? I saw in these ideas ways to link up with autoethnography's narrative and cultural-reflection aspects, but was this a case of trying win over (or frame) Dawn's beliefs and research process with ideas possibly antithetical to those she wanted to explore in her research? Dawn seemed to go for these ideas, but would she be able to talk from them at thesis defense time?

Mingling with voices from the literatures

In ordinary experience we're all in the position of a dog in a library, surrounded by a world of meaning in plain sight that we don't even know is there. (Frye, 1964, p. 79)

(Dawn) Of course, any research journey involves consulting those who have gone at least partly down the same path. Was there some academic or religious authority out there who struggled with Dawn's predicament and question, answering it in ways that could not be ignored? Did Jesus himself not spend 40 days of trial and tribulation to come up with an answer? How about the growing group of psychologists linking religious and psychological understanding to say something possibly relevant (e.g., Bibby, 2002; Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Hill & Pargament,

2003; Pargament 1997)? What about the autoethnography literature itself; there is what Ellis and Bochner say (2000), but should I hitch myself to their open-ended method or try on some of the many other variants of autoethnography (e.g., Baker, 2001; Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2003) that were out there for answering my question?

(Tom) Here is where things seemed particularly challenging in the normal academic sense. A typical thesis features a literature review that draws from and critiques prior research in ways that build a rationale for the thesis research. Normally this entails critiques of the literature on methodological or theoretical grounds. In Dawn's case, the literatures (the psychological research literature but also theoretical and popular works) were a means to, in a sense, critically find her voice from those that usefully resonated, but are there not supposed to be criteria to be adhered to? Could popular self-help books on Dawn's topic be as useful as the rigorous studies of psychologists and sociologists? How would Dawn justify her "selective" reading of these literatures to a thesis examining committee? Such questions voiced some of my concerns about the "legitimacy" of what Dawn was doing. How could Dawn's reading be seen as a rigorous attempt to answer her research question and help her find a spiritual voice at the same time?

(Dawn) Bakhtin (as cited in Morson & Emerson, 1990) wrote about appropriating the voices of others in coming up with "inwardly persuasive discourse" (pp. 221-223). I had the challenge of articulating my own autoethnography, drawing grist for my story from what others, including the "experts," would say. The literature informed my understanding of my developing story as I found no sense of right or wrongness in what I read. Even the books that I did not agree with allowed me to grow as I came to understand what it was that I did or did not agree with, and began to understand why, thus helping to refine my evolving voice. This felt different from the way it had in the church, as often when I found myself in disagreement, I also felt guilty. My guilt was from concerns that maybe I was not good enough or Catholic enough, or that I was missing something of importance by not being able to agree with all that was said. This literature helped me to question (my natural tendency anyway) but, more so, allowed me to feel okay, even good about questioning. I am now more aware that the criteria by which I would judge whether I was "good enough" had been based on Catholic discourse, which, I had learned, was one way to "voice" one's spiritual yearnings.

Conversations on autoethnography

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze . . . focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (Ellis, 2004, pp. 37-38)

(Dawn) All of this backward and forward, inward and outward zooming had my head spinning. Struggling with the validity of my questions, I also struggled with understanding autoethnography. Looking for concrete answers to my many questions and specific instructions on how to carry out an autoethnography, I was overwhelmed with how much of it was left for me to decide and rationalize. Many times this left me questioning if what I was attempting was worth continuing to pursue. Not only this, but in order to share my story, I would have to write using *I*. How weird it was, realizing not only that I had a story to tell but also that it was acceptable to write about it for academics were narrative challenges associated in developing my voice and story. This was a challenging journey to embark on with a lot of new territory.

(Tom) As someone who completed his doctorate in the late 1980s using quantitative methods, I found that returning to academic life a decade later meant learning about qualitative research. Autoethnography was considered by colleagues as the most “out there” of the research methods, seen by some as a self-indulgent exercise of dubious scholarly merit. My inroad to qualitative research came via the social constructionist approaches to therapy, and the notion that autoethnography was a way to answer a personal research question in a culturally significant way had intrigued me, but to get a sense of the steps involved, and the anticipation of others reviewing it was challenging. A recent autoethnography thesis defense I sat in on felt more like grounded theory, particularly when the student offered a general theory for others in his predicament. My having seen Ellis and Bochner before at a workshop and having read Ellis’s (2004) *The Ethnographic I* added to my interest in autoethnography, but Dawn had an important question and a desire to have me supervise her thesis research as an autoethnography. The personal and cultural aspects of Dawn’s question were interesting, too, and autoethnography seemed the most appropriate way to answer it, but what would constitute a good autoethnography thesis or a good process for putting one together? This would be a learning experience for both of us.

(Dawn) Wall (2006) also employed autoethnography as her method, and she commented that at one point in her research, on her first using the word *I*, she felt she needed to check in with her supervisor to see if this was acceptable. I found this interesting for two reasons. First, I also had a difficult time writing using *I*. For me the struggle was that I was unsure how exactly to use this word. I also had questions of how much to share, how much to leave out, what would be acceptable, and what might seem overindulgent, as autoethnographies have been found to be at times. What I learned from Tom is that rather than worrying about my voice being overbearing, overexposing, or overindulgent, I needed to step it up and start using it! Feeling encouraged to use my voice and explore its possibilities, I discovered multiple ways in which it had been influenced, so I learned new ways to strengthen it.

(Tom) This notion of writing and voicing from *I* intrigued me, too. Dawn’s struggle was familiar to me and can bring on a rant about high school English and undergraduate essay writing. Why is it that these and other discourses (Dawn’s religious experiences included) seem to require voiceless ventriloquators, as if the personal had no role to play in speaking from or about these discourses? I felt a weird pull: Are autoethnography supervisors actually giving students “permission” to develop their personal voices in their academic writing, like some Zen monk? If so, how might they privilege some version of the “personal” that fits or does not fit for the student involved? In Dawn’s case, she was in vulnerable territory with her stand on religion and her research question in the first place, whereas I was requesting versions of her personal voice that could do double duty: “help” her find her spiritual voice but in an academic way. Dawn’s newly voiced *I*, in other words, came with conditions, in that I was, at least partly, supervising (i.e., editing) for the academy. My colleagues did not see an issue; Dawn’s process with me was a “developmental” one of mentoring her academic writing into confidence and independence. That sounded fine, provided that the topic was not as personal as Dawn’s autoethnography was for her.

Talking with the research ethics board

(Dawn) My research consisted of interviews with five co-researchers who self-identified as struggling with their relationship with the Catholic Church while developing spirituality outside of that church. Although I used a list of interview questions, each meeting soon became a conversation, always starting with the co-researchers identifying their definition of spirituality. Although I was originally adverse to the word *spirituality*, my understanding of and identification with the word was growing. The whole point of these conversations was to help me better

understand my spirituality, so it seemed fitting that a good starting point would be to know how others came to understand and define the word for themselves.

(Tom) Clearing our research ethics board (REB) involved another set of conversations, another chorus of voices, to reconcile in going forward with Dawn's field research. For me, the REB had become a significant hurdle, particularly with counseling research, where some element of coercion might be perceived. The gist of the concern was that vulnerable (Dawn included) people were involved and that the interviews could cause upset or involve more than a neutral gathering of data. Two submissions later, with counseling in place if needed and consent letters stressing that participants could withdraw should the process be upsetting, the hurdles were cleared.

(Dawn) The REB had many stipulations for the conversations that I wanted to have with people self-selecting for my study. These were acknowledged in my ethics application and reflected in my interview practices and writing: normal stuff. But my first use of I began while writing this ethics application. Fortunately, a mock proposal for a qualitative research methods class the previous year had already helped, and eventually my application was approved. Suggested changes were minor, including recommendations to make data collection and verification of its accuracy with co-researchers easier to complete. With ethics behind me, it was time to begin the writing process.

Conversations between Tom and Dawn: The writing begins

(Tom) I began conversing with Dawn (mostly via e-mail) about her writing, mindful that although this was her research, she needed to clear the thesis exam at the end. I could jump in with normal editing input (APA formatting, wording suggestions), but as Dawn was writing up the more personal stuff of her inquiry, how much should I insert of my views? For example, was it right to suggest that she downplay the humanist aspect of inner being for Wittgenstein's (1958) view that all that matters is out there before us? How much of her spirit journey was inner, and how much was outer? Dawn seemed a little bit lost on her journey; the inner quest seemed self-isolating.

(Dawn and Tom) These kinds of questions surfaced as Tom and Dawn got further into their supervisory conversations between a male professor with a younger female graduate student, and on both a topic and a method that stretched them.

(Dawn) Exploring power dynamics and gender differences, Chapman and Sork (2001) discussed developments and dynamics in their supervisory relationship. Chapman shared that she struggled with wondering how as a feminist she could learn in a program that she felt was androcentric, and viewed her interactions with Sork through gendered lenses. Only a year apart in age, Chapman and Sork experienced questioning if their relationship was bordering on more of a friendship. Was such a thing possible when Chapman felt that women cannot bond with their male supervisors as easily as their male counterparts can? I did not feel that Tom and I had those differences, or, at least, I was not aware of them. Rather than struggling with gendered assumptions and power struggles, if anything, I realized that I gave Tom too much power, and he kept reminding me to take it back, that it was my work and that it could, and in fact needed, to include my voice.

(Tom) For me this was a kind of balancing act. Writing a master's thesis using autoethnography was a new experience for Dawn, but this was her question, and she seemed a competent student who sometimes questioned herself in places that did not seem a question for me. For me, there seemed a fine line between offering Dawn what she truly needed without usurping abilities she had but had not drawn on, but that was me assuming "what Dawn truly needed."

(Dawn) Although I would not choose to think about my relationship with Tom in terms of power dynamics, others, such as Aguinis et al. (1996), suggested a few ways in which such relationships can be categorized. Choosing from their list, if I had to classify my relationship with Tom, I would choose “legitimate power,” a relationship that “stems from values held by the student which dictate that the faculty member has a legitimate right to influence the student and that the student has a sense of obligation to accept this influence” (p. 159). This view of our supervisory relationship is based on how I saw it and how it was shaped by my role in the relationship. I thought that Tom likely saw this too, as he frequently redirected me to find and use my voice rather than submerge it in the voices of my co-researchers, the literature, his instruction or way of writing, and the writing of other autoethnographers.

(Tom) For me, this is a place where many students seem to struggle in thesis writing, particularly in taking a critical stance on the literature or, in some cases, being overly meek in their final chapters. It is not uncommon to see students understandably deferential. After all, it can seem inappropriately audacious to critique a field’s experts or make knowledge claims oneself. Then there are all the normal struggles of writing convincingly, using proper academic prose, and so on. My reading of Dawn’s initial writing was that for an autoethnographic thesis, she was struggling with how much her experience, choices, and opinions should feature when all around her were other voices and discourses on how she should regard her research challenge and proceed in writing up her thesis. She still had to pick how she would proceed, as this e-mail response to Dawn suggested.

I can see you really struggling with this. I could simplify your whole process, tell you what to do, then you could simply proceed on this basis. That sounds like another variant of the issue your thesis is trying to sort out to me. As you’ve already seen, within autoethnography there are many versions, each passing muster with publishers or examining committees or you wouldn’t be reading them. So, just as you are making spiritual decisions that fit you personally, you don’t make those decisions in a social bubble. (Tom to Dawn, November 17, 2006).

(Dawn) Opening my eyes to various discourses that I had been subscribing to, Tom helped me to see how each was influencing a newly found voice, emerging as my writing evolved.

(Tom) Discourse is another example of what I mean by voice. The discourses Dawn referred to are those tackled by critical discourse analysts (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2005) and narrative therapists (e.g., Winslade, 2005). These practitioners draw heavily from Foucault (1977), for whom discourses are “truth regimes” wherein one finds very specific and exclusory ways of talking and relating. Differences between pro-life and pro-choice thought and ways of communicating illustrate this, as might differences in how positivist and naturalist researchers would answer a research question.

(Dawn and Tom) We had a number of conversations about how cultural discourses varied on Dawn’s topic and how she could take up “positions” (Harré & Langenhove, 1999) within them, or come to better recognize her discursive positions (or what we are calling here “voices”) as she wrote. The same went for Tom: He could be positioned by Dawn in ways that did not fit for him. Taking up the discursive position Dawn proposed, as an academic with legitimate power to direct her, Tom often invited Dawn to take the authorship power back, encouraging her to use her voice in ways that he hoped would succeed at exam time. At times, of course, Tom stepped in to say things like, “Can I suggest you back up here and speak more generally” or “Where are you in all of this?” For the most part, however, Dawn found that such times were negotiable as long as she made her reasons for writing in a particular way transparent to Tom and her audience.

(Dawn) These negotiations with Tom highlighted another way in which I could relate to the struggles of other autoethnographers (Wall, 2006): by turning to Tom to find out what was suitable, almost as if to ask permission if a particular approach I wanted to take would be appropriate and acceptable. In part this was because I regarded him as the expert, not only in writing but in editing, supervising, and defensible thesis writing. Even as I write this article now, I am not sure if working with Tom in such a way was appropriate and normally expected. In many ways Tom is, in fact, the expert, but did I give him too much authority? Did I not own my story enough by being too timid to use my own voice to tell it?

(Tom) Negotiability in the supervisory relationship is, I think, key to collaborative and generative conversations, so I would say things like “Push back if what I’m saying doesn’t fit for you.” I was reminded of therapist Haley’s (1961) comment that crazy-making relationships are those one cannot comment on or influence. This was why I was suggesting that Dawn take risks by legitimizing and incorporating some of the very concerns she brought to writing her thesis:

Tom to Dawn: I am hoping you will make your struggles with voice evident in how you write . . . another way of reading your autoethnography is as an attempt to find your own voice amongst all the authorities—academia included.

Dawn’s reply: thank you Tom, again, much appreciated. I am also struck by how torturous I am making things for myself. (e-mail correspondence, February 28, 2007)

(Dawn) Although I might have started out with permission seeking, I found out that Tom was less interested in telling me what I could or could not do than having me highlight why I struggled with such decisions. In time, I found out that it was less about the right or wrong of things and more about the process, while making it clear to my readers how such decisions were reached.

(Tom) For me, this is an important issue of transparency: Readers of qualitative research should have a clear sense of how the knowledge reported was made (Latour, 1987), and this includes the decisions and struggles involved in conducting and writing up the research, in my view.

(Dawn) In writing this paper, I reflected on times when I felt my voice was most off from Tom’s. It is hard to know if such times were due to a lack of understanding concepts such as Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) polyphonic voices, different writing and personality styles, or simply Tom’s having more experience and my having less confidence.

(Tom) I saw Dawn’s confidence somewhat differently. As a therapist and educator I prefer to engage others from a view that they have competencies they have yet to bring to bear on their concerns, competence that can be acquired in a supportive relationship and not simply through advice giving. In my view, Dawn had to step into the vulnerabilities that had her question her confidence, to learn to speak confidently from them. I wanted her to not feel alone in this process, but much of our work proceeded using e-mails and phone calls to move things along.

(Dawn) I wanted to make sure that my writing was still reflective of my journey and how I was coming to understand it. This often times led to more conversations via e-mail and track [change comments](#) as we each asserted our rationales for wanting things a certain way. I looked forward to my e-mails from Tom, and the comments and suggestions that would be embedded throughout my most recent draft. Tom would make comments to prod me to

Comment [s1]: Like this

think more deeply about my experiences and pull me out of my, at times, cyclical thoughts and force me to clarify them to myself in writing them into my thesis. The more I wrote, the more I became aware of, and confident in, my voice and confident that my relationship with Tom was one in which he would help me to stay true to my story while still maintaining academic integrity and rigor.

(Tom) I had just come off some supervision stints where I felt I had to be more active in editing some students' research writing than I was normally comfortable with, and that was for topics and methods far less personal than Dawn's. I wanted Dawn to give voice to a story that would come from her library, field, and personal research, but at times I felt like a word slayer, idea killer or proselytizer, using Word's reviewing feature to request that Dawn jettison some words or insert my suggested others. I felt that I might have been harsh regarding a few of her (cherished?) sentences at times, perhaps derailing trains of thought heading some place I might learn from too. In the entrails of my reviewing delete buttons were there significant parts of Dawn's journey and story I was hijacking? Was she adequately fighting me back as asked, or was she simply being quiet to move forward? Was she self-editing any important stuff that with a little nudge might prompt a richer personalized story? Had my voice squelched or overtaken hers on her learning journey? Were we talking enough when we should not have been using e-mails? I was being too hard on myself, but was I walking my dialogic talk: Did Dawn approve of or accept this process? I was reminded of a story of a successful doctoral student who, on completing her oral defense, heard a comment from her external examiner about how well written the research had been and how, before she could thank the examiner for this comment, her research supervisor said, "Thank you." I did not want to be like that supervisor to get that good writing "out of her."

(Dawn) Unlike Tom, I did not have previous supervisory experiences to compare the current one to. Never having done a thesis before, I had few ideas as to how the process should proceed. There were times when I thought to include parts of my story that Tom thought were unnecessary or did not fit at the time, and Tom did not see this as a great concern. Writing this now, though, I wonder if I gave up parts of my story too quickly, eager to do things the "proper" academic way. Had I too quickly handed the editing reins over to Tom, judging his experience in editing my story as more important than mine in telling my story? This would have been done, however, as my choice, as Tom made it clear that although he might have suggestions, they were just that and always open to negotiation.

(Tom) Part of what I think is essential to a truly collaborative process is that there is a negotiability to the process, one whereby both parties feel they can contest or affirm contributions as these arise. An element of collaborative "wordsmithing" is involved that requires mutual editorial say (Strong, 2006).

Preparing and talking her way through the thesis exam

(Dawn and Tom) Although this was always about Dawn answering her research question in personally satisfying ways, the academic judgment—that Dawn's thesis merited a pass by her thesis examiners—served as a constant backdrop for the conversations and writing leading up to her thesis examination. It was here where Dawn would most need to coordinate the many voices that informed her process to this eventuality. Not only would she have to speak from them, she would need to speak with some authority from them.

(Dawn) It is the authority with which I must speak that caused me some apprehension. Was my story worth telling? Certainly, I had written it, but reviewing and discussing it with others was a different experience, and doing so with authority was an entirely different ballgame altogether! Surely I could speak with authority on my own story, but I did not want to imply that by telling my story on spiritual development, I now had a theory by which all spiritual development unfolds. There was also a tentativeness I felt in concluding my writing, knowing that my spirituality was still developing.

(Tom) I get nervous before and during exams, too. Some of this is because I see the quality of a student's thesis and responses as a reflection of the quality of my supervision and because I relate to a student's vulnerability when answering examiners' questions. Dawn had more than proven her competence, yet I still had questions about whether her autoethnography would suit my colleagues, whether Dawn would get to show what I had seen through her writing, those kinds of things. Ultimately I knew that I would have to let go.

(Dawn) My struggles in addressing my spiritual concerns had already taken me farther than I had imagined they would. Although it seemed as if I still felt at times caught up in them, I had faith in what I had written so far, I could speak to my process and felt that I had something worth saying. With this in mind, I attempted to settle my nerves; Tom had, after all, helped me get this far.

(Tom) I realized that I had compared Dawn's autoethnography with the last one I had served as an examiner of: That student seemed to strut where before he had been so tentative. Why can Dawn not be reborn or some such thing through this thesis? Why must her questions only partly get answered? I wanted to see Dawn also strut into that thesis exam and hear that assuredness in her voice as she responded to her questions and presented her work as good research. Things seemed less celebratory, yet Dawn still had a nice piece of writing. She most certainly had a good enough thesis; there was nothing that I felt she could not speak well of or defend. I just wish Dawn had gotten more of what she sought in taking on her topic.

(Dawn) In writing this part of the article, I was somewhat saddened reading Tom's hopes for my thesis completion and knowing how it actually ended. I felt as though I had let him down and was reminded of ways in which I might have let myself down too. I spent more time trying to find my voice than I did in actually using it, as Tom more than once commented:

Dawn—my sense is that you have used more space on losing your voice than gaining it up to this point, and if this was to be a thesis on finding a voice through autoethnography, you've assigned your first half of your chapter to the reverse emphasis. (track change comment from Tom, February 24, 2007)

(Dawn) Regardless, the time had come to defend what I had written. I would have loved to have walked into that defense room with more confidence, but that might have required writing with more confidence, and I found it hard to be confident in something that was so new to me and about a spiritual concern that in many ways still felt raw. Similar to learning to ride a bike, I did not feel ready to go full speed ahead, I was tentative with my new voice, wanting to be cautious in how I used it and as I slowly tested the strength of it. Like any muscle being used, I know that increased use will strengthen it, so I try not to be too hard on myself, although in retrospect, I would have loved to have had more confidence from which to write.

Final conversations

(Dawn) The exam went fine, but the results seemed to me (and to Tom a bit) underwhelming. My assuredness and sense of completeness with my story had not seemed to get me where Tom or I had hoped. A kind of “so what” seems to be where things were on my spirit journey, though it did seem as though I wrote with greater ease. Without conclusive “results” or an assured sense of where my spiritual self was, I was unsure that I had more than a literature review mixed in with a few conversations with others, along with some of my mutterings. I felt assured that my autoethnography was far from overindulgent and more likely was even underindulgent as I at times spent more time rationalizing what I was saying than actually saying what I had to say.

(Dawn) The spiritual changes were subtle, but my increased sense of self-confidence in my academic abilities was a little less so. This was not just a thesis to learn about my spiritual struggles; this was an autoethnography that challenged me to speak up. From someone who does not volunteer her thoughts in class to sharing my personal story in the first person for my master’s thesis, my changes were not overtly “strut”-worthy, but something shifted in me that was significant. If not conclusive, the story of my spiritual struggles opened new doors, and this excites me as I venture through them with a newfound sense of self and a voice with which to express it.

(Dawn and Tom) We have asked readers to join us in considering autoethnography thesis supervision as a process of reconciling voices. Seen as a dialogic process, the thesis supervision experience is fed by and takes place within many conversations that shape what goes into a student’s thesis. In this respect, there are many things to be worked out conversationally, particularly when the aim involves answering a question of personal significance in ways that satisfy the academy. There were lots of places where we could have elaborated on the voices of co-researchers, but space was a factor, and our focus was largely on our experience of supervision as Dawn completed her research. Autoethnography pushed many boundaries in qualitative research, yet it has grown to become a method widely used for thesis research, despite the many ways people go about doing autoethnography. For us, undertaking an autoethnography meant a foray into new territory on a sensitive topic. This required listening to many voices as we went forward, especially each other’s, but it also meant pulling from those voices what would help in answering Dawn’s question in ways that Tom felt would succeed at exam time.

(Dawn) Autoethnography not only pushed boundaries in qualitative research, but it also pushed boundaries within me as I became more aware of the discourses influencing, hindering, or helping me in endeavoring to find my own, personally fitting voice from these discourses.

Being able to recognize a spiritual thought or belief as being influenced by a particular discourse was empowering and kept me from getting overwhelmed. Rather than feeling that my thoughts were too much, I could step back and realize where they were coming from, culturally, which put me in a better position to determine their fit for me or to decide to challenge them. This might speak to the difference between understandings that we receive and those we more actively negotiate and construct to make them personally fitting. Becoming more aware of these discourses allowed me to question them and decide how I wished for them to play out as I learned to take bits and pieces from the various discourses in the creation of a sort of hybrid spirituality that I felt was a better fit for me.

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