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## Breaking New Ground: Using and Evaluating Collaborative Autoethnography to Enhance Teacher Adaptability in Higher Education

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### Abstract

The combined impacts of dramatic social, industrial, environmental, and technological changes on higher education demand continuous adaptation and reinvention of teaching approaches. We evaluate collaborative autoethnography as a methodology that permits educators to share and interrogate their practices, activating critical reflection, experimentation, and just-in-time teaching innovation, while also cultivating a community of learning. As four education-focused academics teaching into a senior undergraduate experiential learning program, we experimented with collaborative autoethnography to cooperatively assess and develop our teaching practice during the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our experiences suggest collaborative autoethnography's strong potential to amplify teachers' critical reflection and formally support professional development, including through the formation of productive collegial networks. However, we also encountered methodological challenges. These include ethical dilemmas with collaborative autoethnography research conducted in emergency contexts, as well as concerns over the integrity of the reflection process, both in terms of reaching consensus in the interpretation of different narratives and the sufficiency of voices included and excluded in authorship. Ultimately, the strengths and challenges of collaborative autoethnography represent a critical opportunity for teachers in higher education to contribute to further developing this tool not only as a research methodology, but also as a professional development process.

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## Introduction

The combined challenges of massification, emerging artificial intelligence technologies, diversified cohorts, international competition for enrolments, and the accelerated digitisation of higher education compel universities to constantly rethink their value proposition to students. Increasingly, students expect their university experience to deliver industry connections and improve their job prospects (Carretero Gomez et al., 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017), and for teaching and learning to be attuned to an array of student accessibility needs (Populace, 2020). There are also growing calls for hybrid models of online/face-to-face teaching, as well as the delivery of micro-credentials (Dawkins et al., 2019), all of which push teaching beyond conventional practices.

Adding to this dynamic environment, higher education institutions have introduced education-focused academic roles (see Croucher, 2023; Probert, 2013), ostensibly to elevate academic workforce capability for delivering high-quality student experiences. Concurrently, the emergence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) challenges historic siloing of ‘research’ and ‘teaching’ activities by foregrounding the critical synergies between the production of education research and teaching practice. This is expressed in Waller and Prosser’s (2023, p.23) definition of SoTL as “research informed, evidence based, critical yet collegial reflection on teaching and learning practice with the aim of improving practice within the aligned disciplines and professions”. This reframing of higher education teaching – both as a research pursuit and academic specialisation (in our case, we were hired as education-focused academics with a 70% teaching load) – invites the development of strategic and impactful collective capabilities. How can teachers in higher education – whose frontline work takes place in dynamic and changing learning environments – continue to innovate and build reflexivity, resilience, and flexibility into their teaching practice in ways that are also efficient and sustainable?

This question manifested itself acutely for us in March 2020 when, as Covid-19 rapidly spread across the globe, our Sydney-based university made the dramatic pivot to ‘Emergency Remote Teaching’ or ERT (Rapanta et al., 2021). As four education-focused academics from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (museology, law, psychology, and political economy, we faced a sudden and radical shift in teaching conditions. In our context, we pivoted our teaching online, attempting to deliver senior undergraduate group-based student learning, which features student engagement with external partners on a real-world complex problem, via Zoom. Aware that we were living through a singular moment, we decided to experiment with Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) to analyse our experience of this high-pressure teaching context and, simultaneously, progress our SoTL activities at a time when other research projects had abruptly stalled (see Cejnar et al., 2022). In this sense, like other academics, we saw CAE first and foremost as a pragmatic qualitative research technique that we could use during an otherwise “methodologically challenging time” (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p.383). Yet, while reflecting on our CAE project, we also observed that the process of *doing* CAE – of collaboratively reflecting on, writing about, and analysing our experience – seemed to influence not only our developing ERT strategies, but also our individual capacities to cope with the uncertainties affecting the higher education sector during the pandemic. This realisation gave rise to a new line of inquiry: taking a holistic perspective, what are the strengths, limitations, and implications of CAE for academic research and development within the sphere of higher education?

In this article, we examine the potential for CAE to support academic development by exploring its usefulness in dismantling communication boundaries, enabling constructive feedback from colleagues, and facilitating augmentation of teaching practice through structured self-reflection. In tandem, we critically examine the robustness of CAE as a research method with particular emphasis on the ethical challenges we encountered in the research collaboration and storytelling involved. Building on lessons relating to CAE in and beyond SoTL, we present key considerations for planning and conducting CAE as a means to explore the experience of higher education teaching, but also as a vehicle for collaborative curriculum evaluation and co-design. We assess ways in which contextual ethical dilemmas, such as those relating to reputational risks and confidentiality, may create barriers for broadening the use of CAE beyond research into professional development in higher education. Finally, considering the limitations of our own CAE, we highlight the importance of extending CAE partnerships beyond the academy to more meaningfully engage critical stakeholder voices – like those of students – in the future.

## **Literature**

### **CAE and its Autoethnographic roots**

To explore the rationale for CAE in SoTL, it is important to first understand its philosophical underpinnings as a qualitative research method. Now dominant in social sciences research, qualitative research is founded in an interpretivist paradigm that recognises subjectivity as an inherent feature of empirical enquiry (Lapadat, 2018). Forms of Autoethnography (AE) represent a radical extension of this philosophy by accepting (at least in principle) that any form of social research on external research subjects is inherently extractive and can, therefore, be viewed as unethical (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Instead, autoethnographers perceive a close examination of their own lived experiences as valuable – if not sufficient – to understanding wider cultural dynamics.

AE's goal of documenting personal experience and achieving self-understanding within wider socio-cultural frameworks generally occurs along a typological spectrum (Le Roux, 2017). At one end, evocative or emotional AE eschews the detached reasoning associated with traditional ethnographic techniques that seek to extrapolate cultural insights from situated observations. Practitioners of this type of AE – including key figures such as Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner – use conversational narrative writing to produce emotional resonance between the embodied experiences of the autoethnographer and the reader: “I want people to feel the story in their guts, not just know the ‘facts’ in their heads” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). By contrast, analytic AE approaches autoethnographic writings as a form of empirical data in which wider social and cultural phenomena are embedded (Anderson, 2006; Le Roux, 2017). Regardless of internal debates about methodological orientations and style, the extreme introspection characteristic of AE has left it open to questions about its trustworthiness and legitimacy as qualitative research (Le Roux, 2017).

### **CAE and its potential in SoTL**

As a narrative-based methodology that moves AE beyond the individual writer/researcher, CAE permits researchers to jointly interrogate and revise their practices, while simultaneously learning from each other (Chang et al., 2012, pp.147-8). It builds on AE's distinctive use of

autobiography as data, as well as the premise that cultural analysis (inference from the personal to wider social patterns) can be achieved by examining relationships between the self and others (Chang et al., 2012; Stahlke Wall, 2016). CAE also responds to critiques of the 'hyper-subjectivity' of AE (Hernandez et al., 2017; Lapadat, 2018) by providing a space for researchers to "hold up mirrors to each other in communal self-interrogation" (Chang et al., 2012, p.26). This in-built corrective mechanism helps researchers counter the assumptions, biases, and blind spots of the lone autoethnographer. This form of intrinsic peer review is further enhanced when participant-researchers come from different disciplines, as the analysis of the AE data comes under the scrutiny of fresh perspectives and "multifocal" interpretations (Chang et al., 2012, p.27). Through these methodological characteristics, CAE not only addresses some of the key limitations of AE but is adaptable to a range of (inter)disciplinary contexts and collaborations, including significant uptake in SoTL.

CAE is being used in a variety of educational research because it offers a way to combine the lived experiences of multiple individuals to produce insights that can enhance teaching practice and learning outcomes for students. It aligns well with existing emphasis on peer evaluation of teaching in higher education institutions, which already demands that educators leverage peer insights to improve teaching practice (Brookfield, 2017). CAE provides a cooperative framework for peer learning that leverages, and can enhance, collegial relationships (Coia & Taylor, 2009). Moreover, a growing body of research presents CAE as a useful method for allowing reflection and innovation in real time, enabling educators to quickly design and undertake research in unfolding and sometimes unanticipated circumstances. Recent examples in our local context include research on teaching through the Australian Covid-19 lockdowns (Nachatar Singh & Chowdhury, 2021; Authors, 2022), and Godber and Atkins' (2021) reflections on their pandemic teaching in New Zealand. In one Trans-Tasman collaboration, Connor et al. (2021, p.2) used collective "micro-narratives" of four work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners in Australia and New Zealand to produce a "macro-narrative" of pandemic teaching experiences.

In relation to iterative improvement in educational design, CAE's facility to capture and comparatively analyse rich and sensitive accounts of academics' teaching experiences has seen the method employed to reveal useful techniques for developing and delivering curricula. For example, Bowers et al. (2021) used CAE to uncover the affective and cognitive processing involved in faculty decision-making around changes to learning design during (rather than post-) semester, revealing the extent to which academics monitor, respond to, and are affected emotionally by emergent student feedback as they strive to tailor learning experiences to student needs. Furthermore, Bowers et al. (2021) noted that the process of CAE augmented faculty members' reflective practice by amplifying awareness of their emotional reactions to teaching situations, which they subsequently used as indicators of where to target new learning designs.

CAE research in SoTL has also produced critiques of dominant discourses in higher education (for example, see Hains-Wesson & Young, 2017; Arnold & Norton, 2021; Dahal & Luitel, 2023). The approach has been elucidating in contexts where the researchers hold a non-dominant perspective. For example, Devnew et al. (2017) used iterative cycles of CAE to explore the leadership trajectories of women in academia, while Adamson and Muller (2018) adopted the method to explore and share their experiences as non-Japanese academics working in the Japanese university system. Doctoral students, Blalok and Akehi (2017), found that CAE could

be utilised to create supportive relationships and surface sensitive topics such as identity development within the culture of the academy. Alternately, DeCino and Strear (2019) experimented with “duoethnography” to facilitate peer mentorship during their challenging first year as academics.

Yet, despite this uptake of CAE and the call by some scholars to increase the deployment of autoethnographic methods like this in SoTL (Waller & Posser, p. 3), important questions remain about the reliability and ethical implications of the method, particularly noting the ease with which scholars can quickly pick up this methodology to investigate real-time phenomena (as we and others did during the Covid-19 pandemic). For example, Hernandez et al. (2017, p.252) recognise a tension between the inclusive, democratising attributes of CAE and the pressure on collaborators to “rush into consensus”, potentially jeopardising the validity of findings. It is recognised that all biographical and autobiographical approaches carry the potential to affect researchers’ psychological and emotional wellbeing (Sikes & Hall, 2019; Stahlke Wall, 2016). Both Hernandez et al. (2017) and Devnew et al. (2017) also underscore the inherent ethical dilemmas of CAE if other people are identifiable within the resulting narratives.

From a broader methodological perspective, autoethnographic studies are commonly criticised for their ‘self-indulgent’ focus on the heavily subjective – and, therefore, ungeneralisable – experience of the individual (Stahlke Wall, 2016). While CAE arguably mitigates the extreme subjectivity of AE, a preponderance of teacher CAEs like our own (Cejnar et al., 2022) risk a form of institutional navel-gazing (albeit multi-vocal) that excludes the voices of other relevant stakeholders, such as students and community or industry partners. The unavoidable limitations on the transferability and relevance of CAE research findings caused by its methodological dependence on a restricted number of voices should caution scholars in SoTL to carefully consider its application in teaching contexts like higher education. It also signals potential to develop the methodology in the future.

This complex of opportunities and challenges around CAE drives our research question: What are the advantages and limitations of utilising teacher CAEs to gain insights about, reflect on, and adapt higher education teaching in rapidly evolving learning contexts?

## **Method**

In our original CAE for a book chapter titled ‘*Challenges and Silver Linings: Our reflections on delivering experiential learning online during Covid-19*’ (Cejnar et al., 2022), we developed a questionnaire to guide our reflective writing about our unfolding online teaching experience under Australia’s Covid-19 lockdown in the second half of 2021. We drew on Brookfield’s (2017, p. 62) approach to critical reflection to interrogate our experiences through the multiple lenses of colleagues’ perceptions, educational theory, and personal experience, also considering student and industry partner experiences based on our interactions with them.

As the basis for this article, we decided to perform a second iteration of CAE, this time leveraging its reflexive process to document and assess our experiences of using the method. This afforded opportunity to reflect on the integrity of CAE when executed in real-time under circumstances that restricted our capacity to plan for a complex range of considerations in using the method. In essence, this second round of CAE – upon which the empirical findings in this article are based

– functioned as a form of action research (Cohen et al., 2007) by presenting us with the opportunity to both practise CAE and use the process to structure our review of its strengths and limitations.

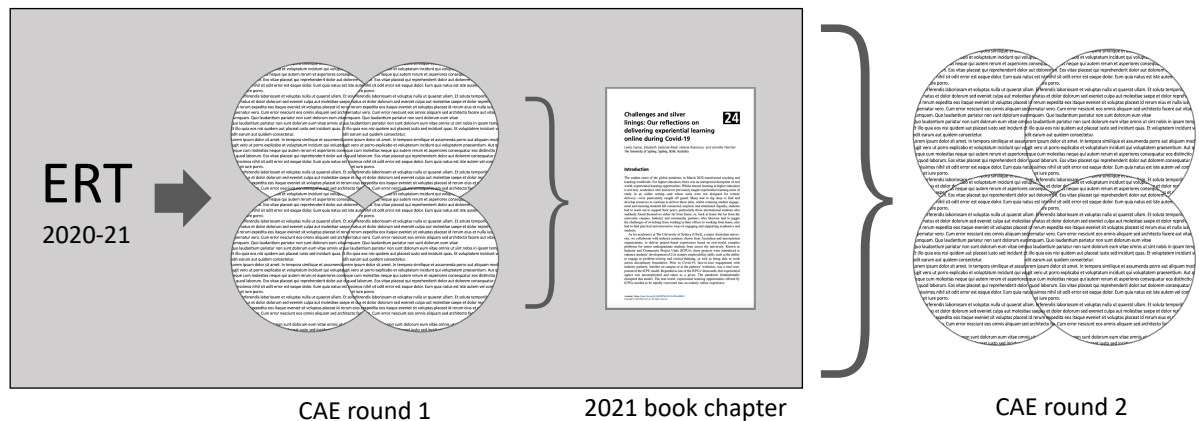
Our systematic approach to CAE, across its design, data collection, and analysis of results, places our study at the analytical end of the autoethnographic spectrum (Anderson, 2006; Le Roux, 2017). Kolb and Kolb’s (2018) experiential learning cycle informed this reflexive approach; each of us began with an individual account of our experience of CAE, followed by conceptual analysis and collaborative evaluation, concluding with a consideration of how to adapt our future CAE practice. We each reviewed all our original reflective narratives of ERT as well as the book chapter that emerged from them, using the following question prompts to compare our narratives, reflect on our experience of engaging in CAE, and consider the impact of the CAE process on our respective teaching practices:

1. What are the similarities and differences in our individual reflections?
2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the individual reflections?
3. How did we feel about sharing our individual reflections and reading others?
4. How well were individual reflections represented in the book chapter (ideal is democratisation and trust, but was this achieved)?
5. To what extent did the experience and outcomes of the CAE influence changes in our teaching practice (i.e., was the experiential learning cycle completed)?
6. Do we have any examples of the impact of any changes made to student experience/learning outcomes?

We provided similar length textual responses: Leela (4 pages), Jennifer (4 pages), Elisabeth (3 pages) and Helena (5 pages) and submitted our own reflections before reading others’.

Figure 1

Visual Summary of the Research Team’s Two Rounds of CAE.



In a preliminary stage of sense-making, we read each other's reflective responses, identifying notable differences in content and emphasis, which we discussed at two preliminary meetings. Jennifer and Elisabeth then conducted the first round of formal analysis using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights from the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2009). This involved granular coding of sentences and sections of individual reflections, including clustering of quotes under thematic categories across multiple rounds of review. Leela and Helena further reviewed and developed the categories. In coding our reflections, we identified a range of themes related to the opportunities and challenges of conducting CAE in higher education. Our interpretations were debated and iteratively refined during the writing up and editing process (Boellstorff, 2012), and where still contested, were checked back to the CAE reflections.

## Results

Several themes emerged from our thematic analysis, spanning a range of individual and collective perceptions around the opportunities and benefits of CAE as a tool for professional development in higher education. For example, we all valued the foundation of trust we established through our initial CAE partnership, which had the effect of strengthening our working relationships for the future. We also experienced growth in critical self-awareness of our teaching practice, as well as broader personal growth and professional validation and agility. These features stood out as key benefits of conducting CAE, pointing to the potential of this methodology for developing teacher confidence and adaptivity in the face of unfamiliar teaching contexts.

### Establishing trust and working relationships through CAE

We were able to forge a strong foundation of trust by participating in CAE, enabling us to share and collectively analyse our reflections. Helena described the collaboration as taking place in “a climate of psychological safety where it really was possible to share our intimate impressions and responses to what was happening around us”. Elisabeth explained that the group leveraged existing collegial relationships to overcome individual reluctance to share personal information:

*I think we were able to manage ethical issues on the fly because we had trusting relationships which we had established by working together in a shared teaching program.*

Additionally, each of us reflected that the process of the CAE enabled us to develop further trust and rapport with each other, helping to bridge the isolation we felt in the online teaching context by instigating productive communication focussed on our shared teaching challenges.

Mutual accountability was an important feature of the trust established in our CAE partnership. Helena noted that she felt impelled to produce an honest and engaging account given the sense of shared responsibility among the collaborators:

*[F]eeling accountable to my CAE colleagues to produce a quality reflection, I remember being quite careful about constructing the narrative and making sure it came across as a coherent piece of writing, rather than a jumble of my thoughts.*

This facilitated a shift from an individual to a collective mindset. As part of the CAE process, we transitioned from siloed narratives to collective outputs. This was analogous to our changing experience of teaching, from the isolation we experienced during the pandemic to sharing our experiences and troubleshooting together to solve emerging challenges. The development of

these extended working relationships has benefitted each of us far beyond the pandemic and beyond our immediate teaching concerns. Helena explained:

*...the CAE process greased the wheels of ongoing collaborations that have made a big difference across various dimensions of our work, including curriculum design, coordinating team research activity, and managing a range of professional relationships.*

Likewise, Jennifer noticed that *“it strengthened our working relationships with each other too: sharing workload, work practices, and research opportunities more freely”*.

### **Mutual learning through the reflexive CAE process**

The structure of CAE saw each of us necessarily adopt a process of cyclical reflection, including self- and peer-critique. As our awareness of each other’s perspectives grew, we experienced personal growth and professional validation, realising that many of the individual obstacles and concerns that we faced in our teaching practice were also experienced by our colleagues. For example, Leela realised that private uncertainties about her own teaching adaptations were mirrored across the group, providing reassurance and facilitating greater openness to considering other approaches: *“there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to collaborative, online learning - whether during or outside of a pandemic!”*

By providing an opportunity to confess the compromises and mistakes we had made in our teaching, CAE gave us the latitude to revisit and revise suboptimal teaching practices that developed in the ERT context. Helena reflected:

*Reading everybody's narratives helped reinforce to me that it's okay not to be a teaching expert all the time, and to continue to learn as you go... The inevitability of sometimes ‘teaching badly’ was a positive insight for me and made me feel more connected to my colleagues.*

The validation achieved through revealing our own (and reading each other’s) experiences helped us build confidence in our capacity to cope with emergent teaching and learning challenges. Jennifer stated:

*We all benefited from hearing each other’s accounts of difficulties, primarily for our own self-esteem... I learned tips from the other authors about how they worked to solve some problems such as those around inclusive practices for students, and around the technological issues.*

The analysis of the CAE narratives composed for our book chapter enabled us to identify common points of concern, share teaching strategies, and develop in-the-moment experimentation to collaboratively strengthen our responses to the ongoing challenges arising in our online classrooms. Elisabeth reflected:

*I can see real alignment between CAE as a research method and a co-teaching/co-curriculum design device. I would love to explore how CAE can inform peer evaluation processes in the future.*

Additionally, the ability to capture critical teaching and learning insights as they happen across a teaching team is also a key benefit because of the likelihood of similar situations arising in the future, and the propensity for lessons to be undocumented and forgotten. For example, Helena’s



reflection initially expressed her concern about the “*faceless interactions, the abstraction of teacher-student relations, [and] the feeling of teaching at a distance*”. These early impression of ERT developed into consistent longer-term observations that demanded new strategies – such as engaging students via email and encouraging one-to-one consultations – to reinforce student-teacher relatedness in the online environment. In turn, Leela observed:

*This methodology has provided me with the opportunity to reflect about my teaching approach pre- and post-Covid-19, as well as on what worked/did not work for me as I worked across disciplinary boundaries as an interdisciplinary academic.*

The process of CAE also served as a reminder of the benefits of ongoing critical reflection and seeking regular feedback from multiple sources; a practice that can otherwise be deprioritised given the competing commitments and time constraints routinely experienced by academics.

### **CAE’s impact on professional and personal wellbeing**

Though the CAE was originally a vehicle for academic reflection on our collective experience of online experiential teaching, our analysis revealed the benefits of sharing our experiences for our individual wellbeing. Our experience of the online transition in ERT was personally and professionally taxing, but often hidden behind professional masks. The unveiling of that was described by Elisabeth:

*I felt inspired by my colleagues’ accounts and grateful that we captured their experiences.... It’s unexpected how cathartic it is to have individual and shared accounts of a time that was very challenging personally and professionally.*

The CAE process also helped us achieve a more balanced perspective on our responses to online teaching, stimulating more careful evaluation of this teaching context and enabling us to better discern its advantages as well as disadvantages. As Helena explained:

*I certainly had a sense that [CAE] revealed some of my own blind spots – like the need to consider the up-sides of an emergency shift to online teaching! .... bearing witness to the reflections of others triggered an additional round of reflection for me.*

At the same time, while highlighting the professional and interpersonal benefits of CAE in facilitating the formation of collegial support networks, it is also important to consider the potential for external factors to limit or neutralise these gains. In her second-round reflection, for example, Leela noted that the intra-team trust and interdependence forged at the height of ERT (and consolidated through our initial CAE process) was subsequently challenged by the renewed vulnerability we experienced due to our university’s austerity measures and the threat of academic job losses.

### **Challenges and limitations of CAE**

Several important challenges also emerged from the thematic analysis of the CAE narratives produced for this research. These primarily related to inter-relational aspects of conducting and analysing the CAE, as well as methodological concerns and lessons. We all experienced some level of discomfort, particularly regarding the writing and sharing of our initial reflections.

### **Establishing psychological safety and broader ethical practice principles**

Analysis of our second-round reflections revealed that we all underestimated the extent to which sharing our observations, emotions and interpretations about our teaching would make us feel vulnerable and subject to scrutiny. Leela reflected that the process was “just a little outside of all our comfort zones” while Jennifer wrote: “I think it was daunting for all of us, as we tend to be natural critics of our own work”. In fact, feelings of inadequacy and heightened self-consciousness emerged through the process of comparing our narratives. Helena reflected:

*I felt that my writing was, in some sense, pretentious, because I had concentrated so much on the style, and the structure and my narrative seemed too premeditated. I was a little bit embarrassed of my writing.*

In turn, Elisabeth wrote: “We all shared some worries and feelings of inadequacy, which we had, and as such we were all a little ‘exposed’ professionally in our reflections” while Leela worried that “perhaps others reflected more deeply [than I]”.

The prevalence of feelings of vulnerability suggests that underlying expectations of ourselves in relation to our colleagues and broader conceptions of academic identity - including the need to fulfil the role of the ‘excellent’ teacher and the impression management involved in consistently projecting professionalism - may have contributed to the sense of risk we associated with the autobiographical nature of CAE.

Given that our CAE was a real-time response and processing of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our teaching, it is perhaps not surprising (with the benefit of hindsight) that this resulted in very revealing personal accounts from some participants. Jennifer noted: “Our individual reflections... expressed feelings of isolation, feelings of unpreparedness, and the ordeal of working in an emergency context”. Helena observed that Elisabeth’s original reflection was deeply affective, conveying the stress and anxiety she felt while teaching remotely and simultaneously juggling home schooling and the diagnosis of a serious health condition within her immediate family. In turn, Elisabeth considered how she “worried about sharing my reflection, as it was very personal. Then, on comparing this to others I saw that I had ‘overshared’...”. Retrospectively, she questioned the wisdom of covering extensive personal terrain, such as the impact on her teaching of the mental and physical health challenges faced by her family during the lockdowns. Indeed, at the outset of the project, we did not predict how personal some of our reflections would be.

These reflections point to the ethical demands that CAE produces, not only in terms of the wellbeing of researchers and other people implicated in our stories (such as Elisabeth’s family), but the specific concerns that arise in researcher-practitioner contexts. For example, alongside our CAE research, we were active co-workers. We did not consider in advance whether conducting the CAE could produce challenges for our working relationship, or if we would feel less comfortable as a result. Elisabeth observed:

*... once we had our CAEs together, we took care to identify and manage potential ethical issues though we did not anticipate or discuss these in our CAE design - which I think is a big oversight and big learning.*

Our second-round CAE reflections revealed that we had essentially relied on trust – rather than foresight – to manage any ethical issues as they emerged through our use of the methodology.

Helena observed that CAE *“did expose some of my perceived weaknesses, and for this reason I think it’s important to have a certain degree of trust with your collaborators before you start”*. In fact, some of our original reflections engaged with our broader feelings about our work environment. Jennifer noted that these included *“job insecurities, [and] lack of university support for the huge changes we were needing to adapt to”*, pointing to the imperative to anticipate and manage impacts on ongoing working relationships as well as consideration for potential reputational risks (for the researcher and others). At the time we were writing our initial autobiographical narratives, our university announced its intention to reduce its academic and professional workforce due to the financial losses brought on by the pandemic, so any disclosure of potential ‘flaws’ in our teaching practice could reduce our competitive advantage in retaining our positions. This vulnerability also has potential implications for ongoing partnership and data management, with Helena recognising that even a bounded instance of CAE creates mutual, long-term obligations to keep the researchers’ reflections confidential – especially when authors decide that certain details of individual narratives should intentionally remain out of publication outputs.

### **Achieving democratic analysis in writing for publication**

By not negotiating the form and length of our contributions in advance, the lack of consistency that emerged in our writing also had downstream effects on the comparative evaluation of our narratives, with implications for our textual interpretation. As Helena observed: *“because there was simply more material to analyse from certain reflections... that was reflected in the ultimate content of the chapter that resulted from the analysis”*. Retrospectively, we considered how the relative level of detail, sensitivity, or candour of responses with which various authors answered the reflective prompts may have influenced our analysis for the book chapter, inadvertently creating a hierarchy where some voices and perspectives predominated.

Another challenging dimension of our CAE related to how we interpreted the data. Our abstract for a chapter in an edited book featuring ‘academic voices’ on the pandemic was accepted before we had commenced our CAE in earnest. Our chapter needed to address a particular audience (higher education professionals), meet a deadline, and conform to a limited word-count. The impact this had on our analysis was recognised in our second-round reflections. For example, Helena noted:

*The speed of the output really curtailed the depth of our analysis. I felt that the chapter could have represented the narratives with greater detail and accuracy if we had more time to spend on the thematic content analysis.*

Jennifer observed the extent to which the publication and its overall theme influenced our CAE analysis: *“We were analysing [our reflections] to publish for a particular publication and topic, which meant that fully off-topic material was not published”*. She noted that *“[t]he prompts that we gave ourselves might also have restricted our reflections, rather than being from a wholly grounded theoretical stance”*. Elisabeth also pointed out that the content analysis may have privileged the more optimistic accounts of online teaching and learning, rather than fully exploring the limitations of ERT for authentic experiential learning.

These important reflections point to the need for broader consideration of building the methodological integrity of CAE, particularly for researcher-practitioner and ‘in-the-moment’

research. In our case, limiting our outputs to a sole book chapter inhibited some of the scope to explore the myriad themes embedded in our individual reflections, which would have addressed dimensions of ERT experience and practice more holistically.

### **Building confidence and refining CAE over time**

One key tension in our application of CAE relates to concerns about ‘consistency’ in how we each approached our reflective writing. Helena observed marked differences in the writing style, length, language, and themes covered across the four narratives, which complicated the process of comparison. Jennifer also acknowledged stylistic variety, pointing to structural differences:

*[T]here was a range from a more formal style of reflection – that completed the reflective cycle by relating back to theory and practice – to more diary-style that was longer or did not always seek to track back to existing theory.*

While individual narratives will naturally deviate in terms of content, emphasis, and style, such heterogeneity can also confound established analytical techniques when narratives are interpreted side by side.

Some of the differences observed in our narratives might also be attributed to our group’s general lack of experience with autoethnographic writing. Jennifer conceded that our team was learning how to write reflectively through the CAE process: *“Not all of us were familiar with reflective writing in the teaching context”*. There were also questions about whether these differences matter, with Elisabeth reflecting that everyone *“took some form of creative licence to authentically tell their stories, indicating the ways in which individuals may need to reinterpret or adapt instructions”*.

These second-round reflections not only highlighted our difficulty in reconciling differences in our first-round CAE narratives, but also surfaced wider methodological questions about our reliance on CAE as our main source of evidence. As an interdisciplinary team of academics, we had different levels of confidence with the technique. For example, Leela admitted to lingering doubts that CAE *“is probably not widely accepted as a ‘solid’ methodology”*. Helena shared some of this scepticism, questioning the adequacy of CAE as a standalone methodology in the context of the credibility and trustworthiness of research insights. She reflected that *“involving several authors who share and evaluate each other’s reflections mitigates the risk of non-generalisable subjectivity to some extent, but not completely”*. In fact, in reviewing our published chapter, we realised that there was a clear effort to ground our reflections in alternative sources of evidence, including our in-class observations, communications with students and industry partners, and student and industry feedback at the conclusion of our subjects (Cejnar et al., 2022). For Helena, this points to a persisting need to scrutinise CAEs by engaging additional sources of evidence:

*Triangulating CAE with other forms of data, perhaps including quantitative appraisal of teaching impact and qualitative data from the student perspective, would help balance the tendency of autoethnographies to inflate the significance of a single author’s experience.*

Leela shared this view, explaining: *“The key weakness, across the board, is the lack of empirical data to support our evaluation of findings”*. Jennifer, on the other hand, worried that while our CAE captured and evaluated multiple perspectives, a bias was maintained by not including additional stakeholder narratives directly. Only our impressions of student experiences were included, which were garnered predominantly through of online communications, emails, and student

submissions. Similarly, though we worked closely with industry partners in our teaching, their experiences were only understood via our interpretation of their verbal feedback. This suggests the need to ensure CAEs are not only collaborative, but multi-stakeholder, where possible.

## **Discussion**

As Rapanta et al. (2021) emphasise, the ERT experience brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic underlined the need for higher education teachers to sustain a mindset of student-centred adaptability and flexibility. The results of our analysis reveal significant advantages of CAE as a method for developing supportive collegial relationships that specifically scaffold reflexive teaching practice. At the same time, persisting questions about methodological reliability temper our enthusiasm for CAE as a standalone research tool in SoTL. In turn, we see the potential for researcher educators to contribute to important methodological discussions and improvements in the future, if CAE is embraced as a core strategy to build teaching partnerships and collaborative evaluation.

### **CAE for professional development: building trust, peer mentorship, and motivation**

A dominant theme across our reflections was the utility of CAE in building trust among collaborators, serving to fortify working relationships and creating multiplier benefits for professional and personal wellbeing. Arguably, strengthening interpersonal trust among teaching colleagues – especially in a program structured around a shared core curriculum – supports and sustains ongoing reflexivity and teaching innovation, as peers may be more willing to step into the vulnerable zone of revealing their teaching ‘mistakes’, doubts, or areas of perceived skills deficit (in our case, focussing on technological literacy and online student engagement). We found that our use of CAE at a time of pandemic-induced professional and personal distress enabled us to form supportive interpersonal bonds, echoing Sikes and Hall (2020) in their observation that a caring, relational approach to the method can help researchers develop friendship, trust, and even offset some of the stress generated through the conditions under which the CAE is performed. Our experience of the process of preparing, writing, and interpreting our narratives accords with Lapadat’s evaluation of the therapeutic and team-building potential of CAE as a distinct and valuable outcome of the method, where it helps establish “trusting relationships among co-researchers, provides for deep listening and witnessing, promotes creativity and intellectual growth, and offers collegial feedback and mentorship” (2018, p.164).

Despite our ability to create a supportive atmosphere, there remained a degree of reluctance to expose our professional struggles relating to ERT, and we acknowledged that we neglected to devote adequate time to establishing parameters for reflection and dialogue upfront. Nonetheless, our CAE did serve as a forum and structure for critically examining our interactions with students, colleagues, educational theory, and external partners. This outcome suggests that CAE can facilitate the establishment of psychological safety, defined as a collaboration environment where failure is destigmatised and participants feel comfortable to openly discuss concerns, admit errors, venture new ideas, and continuously scrutinise and improve professional practice (Edmondson, 2004; 1999).

Our evaluation also attests to the extent to which CAE assisted us in transcending the sense that we were victims of imposed ERT, enabling a more proactive, agentic posture toward this mode

of teaching. Here, we point to the therapeutic benefits of CAE practice, from which we drew much needed strength and professional inspiration as ERT stretched on. Together with the increased relatedness we experienced through the joint process of reflection, this boost to our self-perceived professional competence and autonomy suggests that CAE can be fruitful in increasing work-related motivation among participants (Ryan & Deci, 2000), with concomitant benefits for teaching innovation and student experience. More broadly, we also found that the process of meeting both face-to-face and online to discuss our project and teaching experiences became a coping mechanism that helped counteract the isolating effects of remote work and online teaching.

The utility of CAE in consolidating collegial networks of trust and facilitating mutual care, learning, psychological safety, and greater confidence to experiment with new pedagogical strategies – even under conditions of pronounced uncertainty and risk – highlights the significance of the method as a professional development tool. While the advantages of CAE for reciprocal mentorship and interpersonal care have been recognised by practitioners (see Devnew et al., 2017; Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Sikes & Hall, 2020), these benefits are usually considered (as they were by us) as useful side-effects rather than the primary goal of the method. However, our analysis supports elevating the prominence of CAE for structured self-reflection, alongside established practices such as peer observation of teaching and dyadic mentoring relationships. Mirroring the experience of DeCino and Strear (2019), the analysis of our CAE demonstrated the effectiveness of the process in helping us identify common core concerns around ERT, which acted as a trigger for mutually supportive dialogues and sharing of productive teaching strategies. To solidify CAE within the rubric of professional development in higher education, we recommend developing the methodology to include a formalised process of pre-commencement participant researcher induction and norm-setting, and recognition of CAE in professional best practice guidelines, such as the UK Professional Standards Framework managed by Advance Higher Education (Advance HE).

### **CAE as research: questions around ethics and validity**

A key appeal of CAE is that it can be mobilised quickly to map and evaluate the real-time experiences of participants. This can mean that researchers lacking experience in the methodology, or time to properly establish ethical protocols for their study, can be drawn to its use. Like Devnew et al. (2017), our initial use of CAE was triggered by its potential to capture an emergent and organic process of reflection relating to our unfolding ERT experience. Coming from backgrounds in the social sciences, law, psychology, and the humanities, we were drawn to CAE for its potential to provide a methodological ‘common ground’ enabling researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to work together. The outcomes of our CAE demonstrate the effectiveness of the method in this regard: we were able to operationalise it quickly in both rounds, with each of us producing narratives that were distinct but still conducive to comparative analysis.

Looking beneath the apparent success of our CAE, however, the extent to which we were able to navigate concerns about disclosure of personal information, potential reputational risk in a climate of job uncertainty, and a democratic approach to content analysis, was more attributable to our existing and strengthening collegial relationships rather than explicit project management of the CAE process. For the sake of capturing our unfolding responses to ERT, we inadvertently sacrificed pre-planning that could have established clearer parameters around our contributions

and delegation of project responsibilities (Devnew et al., 2017). The consequences were captured in our second-round CAE, where our narratives discussed vulnerability in the group regarding 'oversharing' of intimate details of our ERT experiences, self-consciousness around writing style and length, and concern that salient insights in the content analysis were buried in the desire to conform to the target publication's thematic bent. As poignantly documented by Sikes and Hall (2019), these realisations underscore the potential for CAE to cause psychological discomfort to researchers. Moreover, because published autoethnographies and CAEs persist in the public sphere and the readership cannot be controlled (Lapadat, 2018), the inclusion of sensitive information and details about other people should be considered from a long-term perspective. These considerations reinforce the need for concerted norm-setting and discussion of mutual expectations among participants before a CAE begins.

It is also important to consider the commitment that comes with conducting a CAE. The richness of CAE data itself benefits from ongoing partnerships; if the nuance of the data is to be captured – and to afford the time needed to navigate analysis without rushing to consensus – researchers need to consider a publication strategy that goes beyond a single output. In the case of our original CAE project, the recommended word-count of the publication limited the scope, which ultimately favoured reporting of the 'silver linings' of ERT. As a result, some of the more nuanced critiques about the limitations of the online learning environment were somewhat neglected. This points to the "performativity" recognised as a feature of other forms of reflective writing (Macfarlane & Gourlay, 2009), where conformity to the normative script of remediation through reflection can mask authors' authentic responses and attitudes. CAE in an ERT context may, therefore, never achieve what Boellstorff (2012, p.185) considers the ideal of "fully fledged ethnography": full exploration of diverse perspectives, cultural domains, and related literatures.

Further methodological concerns emerge if there is a reluctance among CAE contributors to critique others' observations or point out implicit assumptions. Despite being a collaborative process, contributors may not feel comfortable challenging each other's perceptions, as each contributor's 'lived experience' is seen as inherently authentic and carries equal evidentiary weight. This mirrors a groupthink scenario (Amason et al., 1995), where the positive intention to acknowledge subjective experience and maintain group harmony may create reticence toward voicing alternative views.

Recognising the specificity of individual interpretations and to avoid replicating the gratuitous 'navel gazing' of which AE is often accused (Hernandez et al., 2017), it may be fruitful to consider more carefully the voices represented in a CAE. Drawing on Brookfield's four lenses of reflective teaching (Brookfield, 2017), there is an opportunity to experiment with the scope of CAE by inviting a more diverse mix of stakeholder perspectives (in our context, for example, students and external industry partners) to take part in the process of writing and analysis, although we acknowledge that this step may further complicate the logistics of a given project (Devnew et al., 2017). Moreover, to increase the credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of findings, CAEs could be combined with other forms of qualitative and even quantitative data collection. For example, had we the opportunity to carry out a more comprehensive study, our perceptions of ERT could have been supplemented with rich data from industry partner focus groups, or implementation of surveys to capture our student cohort's experiences of the ERT learning environment. Indeed, this is where we perceive a strong opportunity for scholars in SoTL to not only refine the design

and administration of this method, but to benefit from utilising CAE to further develop the field and its impact.

While CAE is arguably a niche method within SoTL, it may offer unique opportunities for answering key research and teaching questions. As “best practice” in teaching must be developed in a rich diversity of inter/disciplinary contexts, it is not surprising that SoTL is itself a multidisciplinary field. This in turn builds communication and peer learning challenges as different disciplinary languages and methods are negotiated. In the same way that we, as a multidisciplinary teaching and research collaboration, make sense through this paper of our own teaching practice and professional development, CAE might offer this to other educators and stakeholders. For Waller and Prosser (2023, p. 35), collaboration across diverse stakeholders is especially important in the post pandemic higher education context, whereby curriculum is increasingly designed not only by teachers, but in partnership with stakeholders such as educational designers and even students themselves. In this way, innovating our SoTL methods through tools like CAE may help to build our capabilities as educators by enhancing our capacity to collaborate and learn together.

Overall, we acknowledge lingering disagreement in our research team around the trustworthiness of CAE findings. Influenced by different disciplinary research philosophies, some members of our group consider it ultimately impossible to accurately and confidently generalise from CAE. Rather than theorising directly from the results of CAE analysis, these contributors would rather confine its use to an iterative ‘test and learn’ context where teaching insights that come from reflection are fed back into classroom practice. Here, CAE’s potential in professional development comes to the fore. Alternatively, other members of our research group have confidence in the transferability of CAE findings if enough attention is paid to methodological transparency. They also see the opportunity for the robustness of CAE to be developed through methodological innovation, both by expanding the diversity of collaborators and (or) combining the technique with other methods.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we set out to critically evaluate our first CAE, conducted in the pandemic ERT context of 2021 and resulting in joint authorship of an academic book chapter. By reapplying CAE to reflect on and analyse our initial use of the method, we had the opportunity to evaluate the efficacy of CAE in enabling us to collaboratively interpret our experiences of ERT and responsively innovate our teaching practice.

Our research builds on previous analyses of CAE by reinforcing the effectiveness of this structured reflective process in developing collegial support networks, which proved especially valuable in the highly stressful and isolating ERT context. Our evaluation revealed the extent to which the relationality at the core of CAE can accelerate professional development (in our case, specifically in educational technology literacy, and innovation for enhanced student engagement online). Accordingly, tools such as CAE may become increasingly sought-after as new frontier challenges - such as the impact of artificial intelligence on education - emerge faster than our ability to respond via conventional mechanisms for planning and modifying curriculum or pedagogical techniques. We believe there is strong potential to formally recognise CAE as a professional development tool, especially as reflective practice is already acknowledged as



crucial in continuous improvement of teaching. We encourage further experimentation with CAE in this context, with a view to deepening practitioner literacy in the method and evaluating various forms for their efficacy for professional development.

The outcome of our evaluation of CAE as a research methodology echoes earlier critiques relating to research ethics and the generalisability of findings. We conclude that researchers need to be armed with more practical guidance and protocol to confidently leverage CAE in emergency contexts, so that potential ethical dilemmas can be better anticipated, and the outputs of contributors are more conducive to comparative analysis. We also encourage CAE researchers, especially in SoTL, to consider including narratives of key stakeholders (such as students) and additional sources of evidence (to achieve triangulation of information), both of which can provide an additional corrective mechanism for biases in the analytical and interpretive phases of CAE.

Importantly, in this journey of *reflecting on how we reflect*, we see the importance of continuously innovating our methodologies for interrogating teaching practice and educational outcomes. As the very boundaries of SoTL as a field become increasingly contested, including through growing calls for “students as partners” (Waller & Posser, 2023, p.37), the question of how we collaborate and who we collaborate with in designing and delivering educational experiences becomes more pressing. It will require educators to continuously break new ground in our combined teaching and research strategies.

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