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**Abstract Title:** Charles Sturt University Doctorate: Re-storying collective memory

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**Conference Title:** DocFest 22: Graduate Research Conference

**Theme:** Beyond the Doctoral Degree

**Dates held:** 23/05/2022 – 27/05/2022

**Place:** Australia

**Pages:** 1-5

# Charles Sturt University Doctorate: Re-storying collective memory

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## ABSTRACT

This evocative autoethnography brings an insider perspective to the Charles Sturt University doctoral journey. Here, two academics re-write and re-story their own experiences as higher degree research student, supervisory team member and post-doctoral scholar. The work re-examines several years of Charles Sturt University researcher stories, interpretations written about them and how the meaning, of these stories for the researchers, has evolved. We take published narrative snap shots and revision them as new stories to fast forward them into the present. This reflexive writing tool (after Ellis, 2009) invites us to consider how tentative and incomplete stories and memories are and expands our understanding of a culture by offering new interpretations.

## SITUATING OURSELVES

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the country we are on and pay deep respect to their elders, past, present and, emerging.

Following our first meeting at Charles Sturt University, some fifteen years ago, we have shared the highs and lows of postgraduate studies, our journey as doctoral candidates, teachers, supervisors, co-researchers, and post-doctoral publishers. Our fascination with organisational ethnography has evolved with time—from performance (auto) ethnography to conversational and arts-based forms of practitioner reflexivity, collaborative styles, and hybrid qualitative methodology. For this paper we are seeking to demonstrate evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) using *Revision* (Ellis, 2009) as a narrative research tool that invites us to consider how tentative and incomplete our stories are.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Evocative autoethnography (Bochner et al., 2016)*

The point of this evocative personal narrative writing is that we are not trying to turn the story into data to test a theory. Instead, the objective here is linking theory to a story by inviting others to think and feel with that story, staying with it, resonating, and feeling its nuances. In other words, letting the story analyse the reader while they think with that story from within the framework of their own life (Bochner & Riggs, 2015, p. 208). As narrative researcher Carolyn Ellis says: “The stories people tell should not be regarded as ‘maps’, ‘mirrors’, or ‘reflections’ of the experiences they depict. Instead, stories should be regarded as fluid, co-constructed, meaning-centred performances achieved in the context of relationships and subject to negotiable frames of intelligibility that change over time” (Bochner et al., 2016, p. 94).

### **Revision (Ellis, 2009)**

We are following the teachings of Bochner and Ellis (2016) by firstly gathering some past autoethnographic stories and, ordering then chronologically taking care to include interpretations, written at the time, about what those stories meant to us. Around these segments we wrap a framing story, in this case, the Charles Sturt University higher degree experience and then try to make sense of this life we are living and the researchers we are becoming. Within this frame, we re-present, re-examine, and revision our previously published academic works by writing new stories into the gaps and reacting to voices and critiques evoked through our work. We then add current reflection, narrative vignette, alternative explanation, and critical analysis to fast forward these stories into the present moment (Bochner et al., 2016, pp. 254-255; Ellis, 2009, pp. 12-13). What we are aiming to do here is “to invite others to think and feel with our story” from “within the framework of their own lives” (Bochner et al., 2015, p. 208).

### **PERFORMATIVE READING OF JILL’S STORY**

#### ***Performing organisational meaning: reflections of a doctoral student (August 2010)***

*Jill:* I’ve stumbled in on something innovative and enchanting here. *Tamara* is a play that is also a metaphor used to demonstrate the multiple story variations of competing discourses of an organisation. *Tamara* offers ideas about organisation that are discursive, and language based. As theorist David Boje writes this is “simultaneous storytelling, as a multitude of participants chase stories from room to room and down the hallways of any complex organisation” (Boje, 2020, p.1). Taking insight from the *Storytelling Organisation* my conceptual research design brings into play colliding approaches for opening cultural data to analysis in ways that invite participants to reflect on their own experiences. Not everyone shares my enthusiasm. Several close colleagues disapprove of this design and, tell me so! Meanwhile, my Principal Supervisor just keeps on reminding me to respect the conventional while still valuing my own radically different discoveries around some unconventional field sites.

“Why are stories told in organisations?” asks Michael Kaye internationally renowned communication specialist. Michael is at Charles Sturt University conducting a series of seminars that delve further into the intriguing world of organisational myth. “Everyone in an organisation is a storyteller, in that all people have some story to tell about their experiences” he says. Our workshoping shows how good storytellers will help listeners construct meanings around the story they are experiencing. That a good storyteller builds on existing knowledge and understanding, using analogy, comparison, and metaphor, and involves their audience. I am learning techniques here that are pushing boundaries.

Back in my office, which I had abandoned so abruptly when running from my detractors, I find on my desk a large document folder. Michael Kaye gifted me the research materials from his recently published textbook *Mythmakers and Story-Tellers*. I am moved by the momentum, this nod of affirmation, provides. With final thesis draft in hand my supervisor turns to me saying, “I think we have a PhD here!”. My examiners see it this way too. Their commentary endorsing my conceptual research design and highlighting several elements of the work for immediate publication (Taylor & Carroll, 2010, p. 36-37). I think, this is good and, it may actually be fun figuring out how to publish our work.

***Staying open to organisational meaning: reflections of a post-doctoral researcher (May 2018 – February 2022)***

**Jill:** “We’re going to Prague!” Ivana says, “We’ll be presenting our work as a part of a Research Escalator for an Annual International Conference”. What a perfect opportunity for gauging a community’s reaction to duoethnography as a site for studying feelings of belonging when communicating change.

A Charles Sturt University doctoral project provides the context for change practitioner Ivana and her supervisor to engage with dialogic reflection and open new conversations around how communicating belonging can enhance organisational practice. “Why not take a more traditional approach?” asks the internationally acclaimed Chair of the Research Escalator. “I don’t agree”, says the Swedish Co-Chair, “This is a project that opens new possibilities”. When this happened, we felt surprised maybe even shock!

Some weeks later Ivana emails me seeking thoughts on *Ubuntu*. A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, is affirming and, does not feel threatened when others are able or good. One *Ubuntu* story goes like this: an anthropologist, studying the customs of an African tribe, calls children around suggesting they play a game. Run to that far tree and the one who gets there first can have all the candy that’s in the basket. The children line up and, on the signal, take each other by the hand and run towards the tree. They all arrive at the same time, divide up the candy, sit down and happily munch away. “Why did you all run together when anyone of you could have had the candy all by themselves?” asks the anthropologist. The children reply, “*Ubuntu*, how could any one of us be happy if all the others are sad?”. *Ubuntu* is a generosity of spirit that speaks of our interconnection.

Something shifts in me. I recall the words of Joe Norris and Richard Sawyer, as sites of the research duoethnographers “use themselves to assist themselves and others in better understanding the phenomenon under investigation” (Norris & Sawyer, 2016, p.13). Writing against the background of *Ubuntu*, a powerful metaphor for inclusion, a series of fluid texts emerge. At the heart of this work is a sense of not belonging. In feeling separation, especially from someone with whom we disagree, there is a lack of connection to their experience. This separation can lead to an arrogance of assuming we do not belong to them and that we are somehow better than them! Could this be a form of discrimination? Our paper was published (Crestani and Taylor, 2021). This outcome manifesting further collaborative opportunities with our appointment as qualitative reviewers for an international journal. It’s up to each of us to do the work of belonging. Let’s think more about who we are and what we do and don’t understand about our own perceptions of separation. I am what I am because of who we are (Hailey, 2008). We must keep talking about this ...

**HEDY: FROM CHANGE FACILITATOR TO LEARNING FACILITATOR**  
***The Shapeshifter: Performative autoethnography (2015)***

**Hedy:** I am a shapeshifter, a change facilitator

I shift power relations

From dominant leaders

To empower our people

Am I on the right track?

Tami Spry says "shapeshifting is a risky business, takes a lot of energy, and is enormously

affected by the surroundings" (Spry, 2001)

How true

Karen Vella's experience working in a university echoes, "change work" is "particularly risky and perilous" (Sommerville & Vella, 2015)

When surrounded by my peers - co-facilitators, middle managers

Power flows between us

creativity sparks

endless ideas

and solutions

and then

I enter the executive arena

maintaining my equanimity

Believing everyone of equal worth

and so am I

No game face for me

I show up as my authentic self

Through this autoethnographic "interrogation" I've worked hard to transform my "beliefs, actions and sense of self"

Focused on my self-development

I've shapeshifted

Is this naïve?

My energy sapped

How can I make a difference?

Choking, voiceless

I see and hear actions, words incongruent with collegial values

This IS a university?

Must conceal my body trembles, dread, resentment

My fear

to challenge their perspectives

to shift the power relations

For staff to be heard

creating our future

Why don't they see my worth?

Like Diana, "They don't appreciate the subtle things that I do. Sometimes you are not noticed and appreciated"

Why don't they take me seriously?

Hugh Mackay's words resonate "What is the thing that all of us most desire? ...That is to be taken seriously."

Maybe I'll go external...

***The learning facilitator [2017-2022]***

**Hedy:** I did not go external

I stayed but I moved between the world of HR to the world of academia

I feel so external to that person, that student, that change agent

I learned so much about disrupting power relations

That I don't need to do it anymore

I look around at my academic peers and smile

I was naïve to think that I could change a culture

I just needed to change myself

My doctoral study liberated me from working on and within change

To collaborating and writing autoethnographies about change in the academy and teaching practice

As my shapeshifting continues to reframe my practice

I think,

I am being taken seriously

Does it matter?

## CONCLUSION

By getting curious about who we think we are, as researchers, we can energise capacities for changing viewpoints and open new possibilities for embodied cultural change.

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