RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Capturing the process of knowledge creation: creative approaches for disrupting IMRaD in PhD theses and duoethnography articles

Tom Dobson & Daniel Ingram-Brown

Published online: 13 May 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

Article views: 1

View related articles ⬀

View Crossmark data ⬀

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

🔓 OPEN ACCESS | Check for updates

Capturing the process of knowledge creation: creative approaches for disrupting IMRaD in PhD theses and duoethnography articles

Tom Dobson ⓘ [a] and Daniel Ingram-Brown ⓘ [b]

[a]School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St. John University, York, UK; [b]The Royal Literary Fund, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

This duoethnography explores our use of creative writing in our education doctoral theses by taking an emergent and experimental approach, including written and verbal dialogues and knitted narrative. Duoethnographies should be transparent in their processes and open to different interpretations. However, IMRaD (Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion) as a guiding structure in the writing of duoethnographies elides underpinning processes and closes down the potential for meaning-making. Our innovative approach to duoethnography enables us to arrive at new understandings of the relationships between our identities, our writing and our ethical practices. We also reflect on how written and verbal dialogues offer different affordances for reflection and transformation in duoethnographies. By deliberately presenting our duoethnography as disrupting IMRaD, we show other ethnographers how they can become more transparent about processes and open up the potential for multiple interpretations.

'So should we have an introduction?'

In this paper we use duoethnography to explore our uses of creative writing in our education doctoral theses. An established form of arts-based research (Leavy 2019), creative writing is marginalized as a form of writing in doctoral theses in the social sciences (Paltridge and Starfield 2020) due to the hegemony of 'IMRaD' (Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion – McNiff 2018, p.32). Dobson completed their thesis in 2013 (Dobson 2014), a 'thesis-script' exploring boys' identities through creative writing as they transitioned from primary to secondary school education (aged 11–12 years old) in the north of England. Dobson then become supervisor for Brown, who completed their thesis in 2023 (Brown 2024), a 'novel-thesis' about the processes of writing and teaching a young adult novel exploring adoption (Brown 2021).

The initial decision to undertake a duoethnography to explore our uses of creative writing in our education doctoral theses was a straightforward one. Like our theses, and like dialogic approaches to autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis 2016), duoethnography is 'polyvocal and dialogic', uses 'deliberate juxtaposition', and is a methodology where 'universal truths are not sought' (Norris and Sawyer

2017, p. 17). However, as Burleigh and Burm (2022) identify, the process of presenting duoethnographies to audiences is in tension with Norris and Sawyer's (2017) tenets. As with the hegemony in doctoral thesis writing that marginalizes creative writing, duoethnographies are often required by journal editors to conform to IMRaD (Burleigh and Burm 2022), meaning they become linear, less dialogic and polyvocal, less open to interpretation, and more aligned with seeking universal truths. The immanence of IMRaD in academic writing signifies IMRaD as what Lyotard (1984) calls a 'good form': a taken for granted way of writing that colonizes knowledge, denies reflexivity, and, from a post-Holocaust perspective, has the potential to promote terror.

As well as exploring our use of creative writing in our education doctoral theses, we also seek, therefore, to a establish a new approach to undertaking and writing duoethnographies. We used written and verbal approaches to duoethnography and, in doing so, we recognized how they construct different types of knowledge. Despite our intentionality of using written and verbal approaches to disrupt IMRaD, we reflected on how writing allowed for more instinctive, personal explorations of our use of creative writing in our theses; our verbal responses, and ensuing verbal dialogues, on the other hand, increased the depth of our explorations in different directions and unexpected ways. Our approach to writing this paper recognizes that both forms of dialogue, written and verbal, do not naturally involve using a system for academic referencing. We decided we needed to bring academic references into this paper in a way that, like duoethnography, involves juxtapositioning and dialogue. Academic reading, therefore, is inserted into the text to develop our dialogues using the form of a 'knitted narrative' (Heydon 2010). Through these approaches, we seek to establish a new way of 'doing duoethnography' (Burleigh and Burm 2022), which involves laying bare our processes, rather than obscuring them, through retrospectively imposing IMRaD.

T: So should we have an Introduction?
D: The Introduction could be this. What we're just saying now?
T: I like that idea but I am not sure academic journals will accept an article without one.
D: Yeah, true. Maybe we could make a virtue of the Introduction then, by highlighting the tension between academic expectations and the approach we want to take?
T: We could then move onto a Methodology – more of the discussion we've just had about how we're approaching duoethnography.
D: There's a question about how we identify the nature of the dialogues we are undertaking and have undertaken. Which bits are from our initial written dialogue; which bits are from our subsequent verbal dialogues. The first subsequent verbal dialogue where we reflected on our written dialogue; the second verbal dialogue where we reflected on how we analysed the written dialogue. So I wonder if we could do something like using bold text for the verbal dialogue, where we are reflecting upon and analysing our written dialogue, and regular text for the written dialogue?
T: Like Burleigh and Burm (2022), our verbal dialogue about our written duoethnography is structured around key questions:

1. What have we done so far and why we have done this?
2. What we have learnt from this and how has our thinking changed?
3. What will we do with this data?
4. How will we write the article?

T: Our duoethnography started off by both of us doing a free write about our own reflections, what we remembered about our thesis writing experiences.
D: I think our free writing led to a deeper inquiry than we would have had just through a verbal dialogue. Because I guess you've had that time on your own to begin with to allow your initial thoughts to develop – those instinctive thoughts to surface first and to be fleshed out a little. And then bringing that into dialogue, which is what you're doing when you're writing, it's like you're spending that time with yourself, allowing the instinctive to emerge and then bringing that into dialogue with a reader, with someone who gives feedback. So maybe our approach to duoethnography mirrors the process of writing?
T: Our free writing was cerebral, not really structured. We shared our initial pieces of writing with each other and responded to what each other had written. And then we responded to our responses and kept going. We took turns for five times, until we felt we had exhausted the dialogue.

How Does A Duoethnographic Process Conclude?

D: When you think about our process, what things happen for us to know that we are wrapping up?

S: We come to a natural culmination in our thinking. A tapering off of new insights and ideas.'

(Burleigh and Burm 2022, p.6)

D: We started writing with the prompt 'I remember', which was helpful and that led me to the instinctive places rather than doing a lot of thinking ahead of writing. What did I remember about writing my thesis? What came into my head? What memories were present?

T: Yeah, that's interesting because free writing made me think immediately that the writing of my PhD thesis was also instinctive. I hadn't really planned where I was going with it. I knew that I didn't want to adopt a traditional structure, and I just started writing and I was writing about where I was in that moment, i.e. on a train, and then that train journey became a metaphor within the thesis. So that's quite interesting that our approach to duoethnography made us both think of the instinctive nature of writing. I also didn't have a pre-determined idea of what duoethnography should exactly look like as a form of research. We went with it and I noticed that you approached duoethnography slightly differently to me – I responded to your whole written utterance, but you interjected responses within my written utterances.

The exact methodology of duoethnographies is intentionally open and unprescribed, to the point of being ambiguous (Norris and Sawyer 2017). The procedure is therefore unique to each set of duoethnographers, with the precise methodology emerging as the duoethnography progresses (Brereton and Kita 2020, pp. 7-8).

D: That was an interesting difference, wasn't it? I think for me, after the free write, all my thoughts were then prompted by the dialogue, by what you'd written. There were things that I hadn't initially thought about, or memories that hadn't initially come to the surface but were then prompted by the dialogue. Things that I wouldn't necessarily have thought about.

T: Let's think about where we are now with our written duoethnography data. Methodologically, we took an instinctive approach, similar to grounded theory. We didn't want to be constrained by what thought we might know.

We were also drawn to the idea of 'choosing not to choose' in relation to the arguments that we wish to make about research. Choices are made throughout the research process and are essential to it – choices about where to start, what constitutes data, the roles we may take on and perform, what and how we write, the endpoints we pursue (in terms of reporting, dissemination) and so on. We recognise the word 'choice' suggests a highly deterministic version of the process which is closer to a textbook characterisation than the lived experience; nevertheless, highlighting not choosing seems to us worthwhile. (Frankham and Smears 2012, p.363)

T: We wrote about our experiences and responded to them without doing lots of prior reading: without putting a literature review in place; without having a predefined methodology for our duoethnography. It was more emergent. My first though was to do a thematic analysis our of our written dialogues using coding. To look at what we had written about and to identify key themes, pull those out and quote from that data.

Saldana divides coding into two major stages: First Cycle and Second Cycle coding. First Cycle coding methods are codes initially assigned to the data units. Second Cycle coding methods generally work with the First Cycle codes themselves. First Cycle coding methods includes over 25 different approaches, each one with a particular function or purpose. (Miles et al. 2020, p. 64)

T: But now we've reading more about duoethnography, I feel there are two reasons why that approach to analysing the data is not the way to go. Firstly, because the dialogue is not just the data, but it's always already the analysis of the data as well. So you don't need to approach the data by extracting bits and putting them and put them in into themes.

Sawyer and Liggett (2012) point out that 'the inquiry process is the product, and the 'findings' emerge as co-constructions within the various dialogic transactions' (p. 643). In other words, data can be produced, as meaning is simultaneously made. Separating them out would be artificial and a disservice to the process, in my opinion. I do think this is a good question to consider. It is part of understanding the nuance of duoethnography because often in papers or conference submissions there is an expectation that you outline the sources of your data. (Burleigh and Burm 2022, p.6)

D: That's what we were doing when we were writing. The process of written dialogue, like the process of having this verbal dialogue is in itself a process of analysis, isn't it? You're choosing certain things to include, what you're responding to, so you're responding to themes. You're analysing thematically. You know, when I'm writing in response to you, that's me picking a theme that I'm reading in what you have written. And so that's a process of analysis in and of itself.

T: So we shouldn't do a separate thematic analysis. On the other hand, we can't just present the whole of our written dialogue and this audio-recorded verbal dialogue, partly because whichever journal we go for, it'll be too many words. We have to reduce the data in some way.

D: I had the idea going through our written dialogue with a highlighter and highlighting those bits that have an energy to them. Those bits that we've written and I'm like, 'Oh, that's really nice.' Or, 'That's really interesting.' Because some of it is a repetition as well, so I guess we don't need to put in the bits that are a repetition. We can then discuss the bits of written dialogue that we have both highlighted. That would be a dialogic way of reducing the data.

T: OK, so for our third key question – What will we do with the data? – we'll highlight the written dialogues, discuss what we've highlighted and why, and then arrange them into themes.

Our first theme we named, 'The artefact: critical vs creative'

D: I remember struggling to combine the creative and the critical elements. I had creative, narrative ideas but as I began to put them into practice and then to add the critical elements – the quotes from academic books that needed to be added – I remember reading the text back and thinking it dragged. The creative and the critical elements seemed to be working against each other. The creative writing demanded flow and pace, but the critical elements slowed the pace down, adding (perhaps necessary) critical detail, questions, understandings and explanations, but slowing down the story. I remember grappling with this and getting frustrated with it. How could I make these two elements work together?

T: When I wrote my thesis it didn't look like any thesis I'd ever seen before. It looked more like a very long Samuel Beckett playscript. But I remember thinking it – my 'thesis-script' – was right. That it had captured what it was like to be with my participants, to do the project with those boys in school, to read academically, to write the thesis, to think about form.

D: I remember coming up with methods to separate the critical parts and yet still include them within the creative work – by adding them as footnotes or endnotes. I played with using both. But still it felt like the critical voice was slowing down the narrative voice, the two not gelling. In the end, I happened upon the idea of a 'footnotes earpiece' through which the reader could hear directly (and audibly) from the author. The author's voice – and the critical voice – became a role within the narrative and this began to make the two modes, the critical and creative, work together. The tension was still there but there was a narrative way of dealing with the different demands those voices made within the same text.

T: I remember thinking that there was a problem with my thesis-script. That as I was writing it, it was becoming formulaic and predictable, its reader pleasantly bored. It was becoming what Lyotard (1984) called a 'good form'. And I remember remembering the first time I read Ulysses (Joyce 2010). How I couldn't take it in at all. But how I read it again. And how I realized that there wasn't that much to understand. That it was about a day. A character's walk through Dublin in a single day. The only thing being that every chapter was written in a different form. And so in my final act, I switch from a 'thesis-script' to prose. A short story.

D: I remember trying to write about my interpretation and analysis of the data I had collected through questionnaires given to readers of a draft of my manuscript. I remember struggling, wanting to include feedback that represented as many of my findings as possible – the way readers had identified with the protagonist, the way the setting had added to the meanings made, the positive feedback in terms of the hybrid nature of the text and questions about the age of the protagonist and the language they used. But wanting to include everything was making the scene feel bloated and heavy. I remember us talking about the idea of a fictional house into which I invited my participants, of time speeding up, of the house being almost haunted. We talked about the criticism of using questionnaires as a methodology and the idea that the house was almost like a film set – not quite real. I remember my supervisors talking about approaching the data differently – thinking of my respondents as more like beta readers commenting on a novel than as participants in a social scientific study. I remember this feeling freeing – perhaps I could approach the data differently.

T: My hybridity was academic writing being freed by creative writing. So I think very much my starting point was: 'I'm doing a PhD. I'm in a university in a school of education. I've got my methodology, I'm going to collect my data, I'm going to analyse it.' So it was coming from that academic perspective and then the creative was a way of freeing myself from some of those shackles. And your hybridity was creative writing being threatened by academic writing. Am I right?

D: I guess there was a threat – the threat of making the writing too dense, less fun, less accessible. But there was also an opportunity to find the creativity in the clash and mix of these two different modes – the dialogue between them. And when that worked creatively, it was exciting. It has enlivened and sharpened my writing. And it has made me more aware of readers, conventions, stereotypes and power dynamics within a text.

T: Your reflections make me think how little I problematized the hybridity of my thesis-script. I just wrote it, the playscript and the academic writing, the playscript and the data, folding together seamlessly. I used the academic references and the data verbatim and without much interference from the creative writer in me. More than this, I acknowledge that my academic reading was a starting point for the creation of my characters. So my characters are ciphers. They represent ideas. The critical expressed through the creative, resulting in a thesis-script which is like a 'novel of ideas'. In relation to your creative thesis, to what extent would the gnomish character in your thesis-novel have existed differently if it wasn't for your readings of Deleuze? Or, to what extent would your gnomish character have been the same but perceived differently if it wasn't for your readings of Deleuze? Can we even start to untangle such things?

D: Is it the creative writing shaping the academic? Or is it the academic side that's shaping the creative writing? Both are forming and deconstructing the other. So it's not really that one has supremacy. I think that's an insight that makes me reflect again on this image of The Alchemist that I use within my thesis. Different elements are brought together but are all transformed into something new. Both the critical and the creative are transformed.

T: Maybe this is where we both arrive – the creative and the critical simultaneously forming and deconstructing each other? A destructive and creative symbiotic relationship. And maybe, despite our different starting points, our different trajectories, this is where we both end up?

Our second theme is, 'Dialogue: from antithesis to synthesis'

T: There is strange kind of symmetry between what we're doing now, choosing a dialogic form of inquiry, and what both of us appeared to be doing in our respective theses as dialogic forms of inquiry. It seems to me that neither of us are interested in, therefore, fixing meaning, but rather exploring meaning through taking up contrasting philosophical positions and arguing those through.

D: Yes, I definitely became increasingly aware of that dialogue as I wrote.

T: In our texts, there is a consciousness of the bringing together of two distinct genres with two distinct writers and two distinct readers. In my thesis-script, I problematize this and dramatize this through dialogue between a character called PhD Student and a character called the Reader. In your text, you problematize this and dramatize this through dialogue between your characters Brown, and your fictional editor, Dr Richardson. Dialogue between antithetical characters. A kind of Socratic dialogue played out in the texts.

D: Or something more rhizomic, with multiple voices rather than just two?

T: A dialogue that is catalysed further through our real readers. Our supervisors who either gave us permission, made a response, or made no response, and who, in turn, shaped the textuality of the text itself. And the other aspect of dialogism is that it is Socratic insofar as the differences between the antithetical characters becomes less as the narrative progresses.

D: That's why I found the image of the Alchemist helpful in my thesis. Different elements are melted down and something new is formed – a new substance that emerges from those elements but is different to any of them. I think that's what happens when we write – we add a multiplicity of ingredients to our potion – the creative, the critical, our worldviews, different identities, theoretical perspectives, past reading, instinctive choices, the aesthetics we are drawn to, the expectations of an audience … and these combine to create something that couldn't exist without any of the individual parts but that is distinct from all of them – a new map of the world – a new text.

T: Perhaps this is the demand of the creative form? That our characters must change, that they must come together. Reader and PhD Student. Richardson and Brown. Different but essentially one.

D: I do think there is something in the nature of stories that is about seeking balance, resolving a conflict. Perhaps this mirrors the psychological need to integrate the different aspects of ourselves?

T: Or perhaps this is the demand the academic form. For the problem to be resolved. For the to be a conclusion?

D: But isn't an academic conclusion about one side winning out, rather than a balance between competing ideas? But then in a story, perhaps that's the same – we want the protagonist to 'win' and the antagonist to be defeated.

T: There is structural movement in both our theses towards resolving conflict, to, as you also say, seeking balance, integrating the different aspects of ourselves. Which, of course, makes me think about Deleuze's plain of immanence. Which, in turn, makes me wonder if what I am asserting is actuality true?

D: Another of the 'characters' in my thesis is 'The Author'. He speaks directly to the reader through a 'footnotes earpiece' meaning that, within the thesis, the reader can hear the author speak audibly, interjecting, commenting and instructing through the footnotes. The author brings a different sort of critical voice to Richardson. The author is Brown but a different sort of Brown to the Brown who exists in the main text of the story. This author is an authority, speaking outside of the main text, through the footnotes. I remember enjoying writing a section of the thesis in which two of the characters from my novels remove the earpiece from the reader, saying that they don't trust the author, that he has an agenda. I had great fun playing with that idea. It was one time the writing really flowed as I wrote.

T: As for the author of my thesis-script, he was somehow beyond the list of characters. Understood all points of view. Was outside. But couldn't be outside. Was water between the gaps. A shape-shifter. But not outside. Or rather, all outside.

Our third theme is, 'Identities of the writer'

T: There are key differences between our writing experiences that stand out to me. Our starting points are different. You with a plan in your mind – a sense of what an academic thesis should look like. Then feeling constrained and needing to write more instinctively. And in doing so, laying bare the process of starting to write a thesis by bringing the place of writing, the feeling of writing, into the writing of the thesis itself. Whereas for me, working in a university, I think I'd already rejected that academic form. IMRaD – Introduction Method Results and Discussion. Before I started writing, I knew that IMRaD wouldn't work for me. I was working in a university. I was an academic. I was used to referencing other reading. I was used to drawing upon my data and synthesising it with my reading. The creative bit … well that was my nod to freedom from academic conventions … As an academic author writing in a university and for an academic readership, I used the academic references and the data verbatim and without much interference from the creative writer in me.

D: I think that's right. I don't see myself primarily as an academic writer. I'm not pursuing a career in academia and so perhaps there isn't the same pressure to conform to those expected forms. I approached my academic work as a way of sharpening my creative practice, recognising the underlying processes that were perhaps implicit in my work.

T: You were thinking first and foremost as a creative writer thinks. This means you have a different identity to me. For me, adopting the identity of a creative writer was secondary. You are first and foremost a creative writer, a published children's author. I am first and foremost an academic author, a published researcher of education. So my hybridity was academic writing being freed by creative writing. And your hybridity was creative writing being threatened by academic writing. So our identities as writers are key to how we have approached writing our respective theses. When you wrote your thesis you wondered whether you should adopt the academic form, found yourself rejecting it, and being encouraged to reject it, then wondering about how to integrate academic reading and data within a creative text. As a creative writer, the academic reading and the data could only become part of the creative text once you had found a way of synthesising it with the demands of the aesthetic narrative form. Your identity as a creative writer was always therefore dominant over your other identity as an academic writer. Your identity as a creative writer was always calling the shots. But, at the same time, as you say, this was neither a one-directional relationship nor was it a relationship characterized solely by the threat of the academic and the control of the creative. Instead, your engagement with your academic reading, with critical feedback from your supervisors, with your data, and with a critical methodological understanding of how these data were collected, gave you a deeper understanding of your creative writing processes and, therefore, made you think differently about yourself as a creative writer. Is that right?

D: Yes, that's right … Reflecting on the process, I think that my instincts were to prioritize the creative aspect of the text – I wanted it to flow, to be 'readable', to engage, and it was the creative story form that gave that drive for me – a drive that perhaps came more 'from within'. The academic demands of the project were more 'from outside' – from a sense of what needed to happen for the thesis to be accepted as an academic thesis. The challenge was to combine the two. But that challenge was productive, it pushed me to more depth in my reflections, to engage consciously in aspects of the creative writing process that I may not have without those demands and so I believe it has sharpened my creative writing practice, the skills I bring to it and the depth of my reflections about the process and my engagement with it.

T: Or, perhaps a fairer question, I wonder how you are changed now as a creative writer? How would you now approach writing a children's novel differently? Is your identity as a creative writer different to what it was before you started your PhD? I take it you will answer that it is, but, if so, how? Is the critical voice in your head louder, more amplified than it was before? Has it taken up a more permanent residency as you write creatively? Or does it always raise its voice later? After the idea, the instinct, the writing takes place? Still after, but perhaps louder than it was before?

D: That's an interesting question now I've started to work on a new children's book, post-PhD. I wonder if our writerly identities are attached to specific texts and so change and shift with those texts, rather than being a single identity that shows itself in the same way with every piece of writing. As I start a new fiction book, there is an emancipatory shedding of some of the academic demands of writing a critical-creative text. But also I'm more aware of particular constructions and representations of characters and the operation of power in the text – to the extent that I have just changed the sex of one of the characters in my current work-in-progress as I became aware of gender bias within the story. I am also using structure in a different way – perhaps valuing structure more after my encounters with Richardson while writing my thesis. It's also interesting to note that the protagonist in my new book is going to be 'genre-fluid', which will be part of his gift – this feels like it is influenced by the reflections around genre, mode and fluidity in my thesis. It's also interesting that I am becoming aware of those changes through writing *this* – through engaging with the critical again. So perhaps critical reflection will always, to some extent, be something that brings to light those changes after the event – but I can't help but be influenced and impacted by what has come before, including the critical aspects of my writing process, which are now part of my 'writer's cauldron' and so will always shape what I produce, in knowing and unknowing ways. Our identity and worldview emerge through our writing, and they are shaped by our past experience, reading, reflection etc. Without that reading and reflection, the stock of images we're drawing on when we're writing would be different and so the writing itself would be different.

Theme 4 is, 'The ethics of writing and researching'

T: It always struck me that the act of writing was an integral part of research and that the act of writing itself should be brought into the discussion. It wasn't just the postmodernist in me. So, I started writing my thesis-script and after an hour or so I remember looking out of the window of the train and seeing Peterborough and remembering the past when my grandparents and auntie and cousins all lived there and how we'd drive up to spend our Christmas together. I remember remembering taking the train from Brighton to Peterborough to say goodbye to my grandma in the hospital. The hospital was very close to the station, and I read the start of Pride and Prejudice to her until she asked me to stop.

D: My thesis is rooted in the personal details of my life – particularly being an adoptive father and the whole process of adopting my son … I remember struggling with using these personal details, especially as they related to my son and wife, and I didn't want to expose them or their stories. I remember often wondering about the ethics of including these real-life details in my research. That's why the novel I wrote is fictional and my thesis exists on the boundary between fiction and those real-life experiences – to provide a safe frame for my exploration.

T: I remember looking at the platform sign, Peterborough, and creating a character called Dobson who could remember and feel these things that I remembered and felt. I remember creating another character called PhD Student who was writing the PhD thesis that I was writing now. I remember creating another character called Mr Dobson who was the 'I' who had taught creative writing with boys in school. And a final character, Writer, who was the 'I' who wrote stories with and for the boys.

D: As I wrote, the 'me' in the thesis – Brown – became a fictionalized character. In one section, I wrote about Brown having long hair and smoking. I neither have long hair nor smoke. But these fictional additions helped me to paint a picture of something I was feeling – something real – a disquiet I felt about using the real-life details of my family's life story … I also created a fictional editor – Dr Richardson – who began as a way of introducing a critical voice into my thesis – 'he' didn't like the way 'I' was writing. But as I wrote, this character took on depths I hadn't expected, developing from a two-dimensional critical adversary into a character with a backstory, with fears, regrets and hopes. As this happened, I found the tensions in my own thinking expressed through the character, between structuralist and post-structuralist instincts that shape my writing. Dr Richardson began to express parts of my own personality. Both Brown and Dr Richardson were changed through the act of writing.

T: So, I remember wondering who was the 'I' who created these characters looking at Peterborough train station platform? Dobson or not Dobson? I remember thinking Dobson in this sense on this page would not exist if it was not for the PhD Student who was writing the thesis on the train. I remember thinking that PhD Student had created these characters because of theories of identity and post-structuralism … That I, whoever was I, was not naming these characters but creating them. That these divisions between characters that I was creating were not true divisions. That they could never be true divisions because as

soon as I named, I created, and what I created was lies but that there was no alternative. What was the alternative? To say nothing? To create nothing?

D: I remember reading Jeanette Winterson and enjoying the way in which she walked this line between fiction and real-life, creating herself through her own writing. She is adopted and the way she related this to adoption was fascinating. She said that as the first pages of her story were missing, she had to fill that gap, and so she couldn't be anything but a fictioneer. She said Freud understood this – that we 'can change the story because we are the story' (Winterson 2014). I remember relating that to my interest in Jung, and also to the strapline of my novel: 'The future can be rewritten'.

T: I remember thinking about my participants – the boys. How I wasn't just naming their characters, how I was creating them too. How I didn't know much about them. How in the two years I'd got to know them I'd only glimpsed them …

D: I remember thinking that the character I was creating in my novel – an eleven-year-old adopted girl – wasn't like my son in terms of her personality or temperament. She was more like me. But some of the things she experienced were real, imported directly from our first-hand experience of the adoption system … But I remember thinking 'this is my story, not my son's'. And then afterwards that it was my story, but in relation to our shared story, that these were interwoven, but that what I was writing was shaped by my perspective and position. In part this use of fiction was a deliberate way of giving distance between my son's story and what I was writing …

T: I remember coming back to Dobson. Always coming back to Dobson. To his repression. His family's repression. The unnameable of his parents' divorce. (Or perhaps my parents weren't repressed about that at all. Perhaps my mum and dad talked about it all the time. Perhaps the repression was all mine.) But the boys and the things they said and the things they wrote, I had their words. And I gave them back to them. I gave them characters and I let them speak. And then I let the doubt creep in. I unwrote their words. This was them but it was also Dobson. Always mediated by Dobson. Because it's the writing of self, it's the writing of family – that's where we most interestingly diverge. To start with me. When I collected my data with the boys, I was doing so using the methodology of ethnography. Observing the boys, taking notes, taking copies of their creative writing, listening to them talk, recording them, keeping my own reflective journal. And one thing that started happening was me doubting the way I was seeing the boys and their identities. Their masculinity. Their lack of emotional intelligence. Othering the feminine. Their repression. As a researcher, who was represented by PhD Student in the thesis-script, I started to relate my perceptions of the boys to my own childhood and how it was for me in school. In other words, I started to write about the character who in my thesis script would become Dobson. I hadn't thought about the ethics of it. That's the honest truth. I remember when I gave my mum a draft of the thesis-script to read. She said she was surprised. She hadn't expected it to be about my childhood. She hadn't expected it to be about her divorce. She had to put it down for a week or so. She had to brace herself to read it again. Of course I spoke to her about it. Made sure she was OK with it. Acknowledged the complexities of relational ethics and autoethnography. Weaved her responses into the next draft of the text. But to move onto you, Brown, your approach to writing about yourself and your family was very different. You were blessed with a keen sense of ethics form the outset. You explored the liminal space between fiction and fact, between Bea's story and your son's story, between Bea's story (the protagonist in your young adult novel) and your son's story. And you were keen to almost always keep your own story at bay. To use the fictional framing of the novel and the thesis as a way of transforming, or perhaps refracting, your lived experiences as an adoptive dad and, further removed, your son's lived experience of adoption. I think I had a diametrically opposite reason for writing a fictional thesis. For me, the fictional gave me permission, allowed me to bring Dobson to life, to bring his life into the very texture of the thesis-script text itself.

D: I don't think I felt that – I was often worried that what I was doing was not ethical – taking the personal and making it public in a way that might impact and take advantage of others, especially my son, a child, who was at the centre of our (my) story. But then perhaps it's that worry, that fear, that can lead to a more ethical approach. It was certainly a reason why I kept moving into a fictional frame. But then I felt a pressure from a social scientific model that demands a direct relationship with 'reality' and I did, at times, feel 'am I doing my PhD right – am I including enough data, don't I need to talk about the 'reality' and not just the fiction?' This is reflected in my thesis, particularly in a moment when I use Richardson to list some of the 'real life' events that are imported into the fiction. In the thesis, Brown becomes angry at this, arguing that Richardson is exposing his family's private story and telling Richardson that he has written it as a fiction to avoid this. So, the tension is there in the text.

D: And what about a conclusion?

T: In their conclusion, Burleigh and Burm (2022) come to a natural culmination in their thinking. That's part of concluding or tapering off. I quite like that idea of tapering off.

'At this stage we are excited to invite others into the dialogue.'
(Burleigh and Burm 2022, p.6)

D: For me that's the Deleuzean idea of territorializing and deterritorializing and (Deleuze and Guattari 2021).
    We're inviting a response from the reader, inviting them into a process of forming and deconstructing.
T: We can't do that without this – a second verbal dialogue. A final verbal dialogue after we have read
    through the latest article draft. Where we ask ourselves the question: what have we learnt from this in
    terms of doing a creative PhD in education and how is our thinking changed?
D: I think the thing that I've learned is about the tension between the creative and the critical. It's a productive
    tension that is quite exciting and can create knowledge that I maybe wouldn't have expected. An impli-
    cation of this is that researchers need to be brave in terms of combining different forms and different
    modes. Not worrying and knowing that the whole process is fluid? I think it's that fluidity and that open-
    ness and that ability to connect different things which is exciting and makes the new knowledge that is
    generated.
T: I understood that we approach the relationship between the creative and the critical and the ethics of
    doing research creatively in different ways. And I understood that's probably to do with our different domi-
    nant identities as we began the research process. We occupy different 'landscapes of practice' (Wenger-
    Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015), which shape our view of ethics. You the creative writer; me the
    academic.
D: Yes, one of the big insights for me in terms of that dialogue was allaying some of my fears around ethics. It
    helped me to see the ethical standpoint that I had taken by using fiction.
T: It made me realize that I hadn't really thought about ethics in enough detail. I approached ethics more
    from an academic perspective than a writerly perspective. As a writer of fiction, I think you were always
    already thinking about ethics. The problem with ethics in a university is that can become almost like a
    tick box event. A bolt-on, which can mean you're not thinking it through in its entirety. Thinking ethics
    through in its entirety is something that I felt you were always already doing anyway as a writer.
D: I think because when I'm writing I want the book I'm writing to be popular. So I'm also aware that it's going
    be read by readers who are going to understand if it's not ethical.
T: You're aware of the way in which you draw upon your own lived experiences as a writer and transform
    those; whereas, as a researcher, I was less used to doing that and I wasn't automatically thinking
    through some of those ethical issues. Fundamentally, it made me realize how inextricable writing is
    from identity, particularly when you allow the creative to come into writing. With traditional academic
    writing you have the IMRaD structure that can be seen as an attempt to elide the identity of the
    author. But with the creative, the identity of the author is always going to breakthrough, so if we better
    understand our identities as authors, I think we have a better understanding of the ways in which we
    write. Shall we move onto thinking about doing duoethnography?
D: For me, I didn't know much about duoethnography to begin with and I haven't done lots of reading
    around it. So the knowledge I've got about it has come out of the practice of doing it. I think it's interesting
    that idea that it should be emergent, dependent on the people who are doing it in terms of the shape that
    it takes.
T: I think taking a grounded approach to doing a duoethnography allowed us to be more authentic. If we
    were adopting a set process that had been laid out by others, then I'm not sure it would have been as
    transformative for us. I think there's something about the grounded approach that we've taken and devel-
    oped. Within our approach, it made me think there's a difference between a written dialogue and sub-
    sequent verbal dialogues and that duoethnographers should think about using both writing and verbal
    utterances when doing duoethnography.
D: The written and verbal dialogues have different textures and they provoke different ways of thinking.
T: The writing enabled me to think more deeply by myself, which I think is something that you mentioned.
    Although my thoughts were still instinctive, they were more developed than the thoughts in the verbal
    dialogues. In both the verbal and the written dialogues, however, the responses of you, the other
    person, were key in in shifting my thinking and making me think about things that I wouldn't have
    thought about if I had been by myself.
D: If either of us had written this on our own, it would be a totally different piece of writing.
T: The other thing I thought about was the form that duoethnography articles take. Breault (2016) writes
    about the importance of establishing some guiding principles for duoethnography without being too pre-
    scriptive. More specifically, he calls for conversations in duoethnography to be made more transparent so
    that the reader can witness the transformative process of duoethnography. Most of the duoethnography
    articles I've read have been a bit restrictive because of their use of the IMRaD structure. That gives me the
    sense that they are hiding away some of the process, some of the dialogue, to arrive at a final product. This
    means their duoethnographies might make more sense to a reader, but could be seen as artificial?

D: I guess that relates back to the writing of our PhD theses in terms of breaking away from some of those expected structures – trying to present our findings in a more authentic way.

T: And I think that also speaks to the idea of: 'Well, here's the process. This is how we've done this. We're leaving the meaning making open, and so now it's over to you as the reader to make of it what you will.'

D: That's a good place to end.

(One Reviewer wondered how we were going to integrate the Reviewers' critical voices in our revised text. To stay true to our data, we could not make revisions to our written and verbal dialogues, so instead focused our revisions on our more traditional Introduction. This Reviewer's comment also made us think that, from an ethical perspective, we could have invited Reviewers to be participants. If we had received institutional ethical clearance, and if they, and the journal Editors, had given their informed consent to participate, we could have polyvocalized our text even more by integrating their anonymous written feedback in our dialogues. Maybe next time?)

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Tom Dobson 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5354-9150
Daniel Ingram-Brown 🆔 http://orcid.org/0009-0005-9638-4233

References

Bochner, A., and Ellis, C., 2016. *Evocative autoethnography*. New York: Routledge.

Breault, R.A., 2016. Emerging issues in duoethnography. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, 29 (6), 777–794. doi:10.1080/09518398.2016.1162866.

Brereton, P., and Kita, S., 2020. Exploring teacher creativity through duoethnography and reflection. *Teacher development academic journal*, 1, 7–17.

Brown, D.I., 2021. Bea's witch. Hampshire: Lodestone Books.

Brown, D., 2024. Mapping the construction of a gothic adoption fiction and its creative use with secondary students. PhD thesis.

Burleigh, D., and Burm, S., 2022. Doing duoethnography: addressing essential methodological questions. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 21, 1–8.

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F., 2021. *A thousand plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Press.

Dobson, T., 2014. *Naming the unnamable: researching identities through creative writing*. Netherlands: Sense.

Frankham, J., and Smears, E., 2012. Choosing not choosing: the indirections of ethnography and educational research. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 33 (3), 361–375. doi:10.1080/01596306.2012.681897.

Heydon, R., 2010. Knitting teacher: A narrative inquiry of a researcher Who Has been researched. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16 (2), 130–139. doi:10.1177/1077800409350695.

Joyce, J., 2010. *Ulysses*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics. (Original publication date: 1922).

Leavy, P., 2019. *Handbook of arts-based research*. London: Guilford Press.

Lyotard, J.-F., 1984. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McNiff, S., 2018. Philosophical and practical foundations of artistic inquiry. *In*: P. Leavy (ed.) *Handbook of arts-based research*. Guilford Press.

Miles, M., Huberman, A., and Saldana, J., 2020. *Qualitative data analysis – A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). London: Sage.

Norris, J., and Sawyer, R.D., 2017. Toward a dialogic methodology. In: J. Norris, R. D. Sawyer, and D. Lund, eds. *Duoethnography: dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. California: Left Coast Press, 9–40.

Paltridge, B., and Starfield, S., 2020. Change and continuity in thesis and dissertation writing: the evolution of an academic genre. Journal of English for academic purposes, 48, pp. 1–16. doi:10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100910.

Sawyer, R.D., and Liggett, T., 2012. Shifting positionalities: a critical discussion of a duoethnographical of a personal curriculum of post/colonialism. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 11 (5): 628–651.

Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015. *Learning in landscapes of practice: boundaries, identities and knowledgeability in practice-based learning*. Oxon: Routledge.

Winterson, J., 2014. *Oranges are not the fruit*. London: Vintage.