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***Faculty of Education***

Te Kura Toi Tangata

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Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato



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Being a Researcher  
and Doing Research

# WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

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## THE OTHERS AND/IN ME

JOAN VALENZUELA

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**IN A FEW WORDS** *This autoethnographic paper is about how my first paper took its tangible form. When for the first time I attempted to write an academic paper meant for a conference presentation, I struggled to speak in my own voice. In the process of discovering a distinct manner of speaking, I inevitably and spontaneously engaged in multiple and constant dialogic verbal exchanges between me and the others: myself, my mentor, the authors of the texts, and the other people around me. These exchanges were not always smooth; in fact, most were filled with conflicts, doubts and inconsistencies. Subscribing to Bakhtin's theory of language as discourse, I make explicit that each phase of conducting and writing research is essentially dialogic. Further, I illustrate how the dialogic dimension of the whole research process is irremovable because capturing the multiple realities in a qualitative research paradigm presupposes a dexterous and careful use of an indispensable tool called language. Finally, I argue through my stories that heightening my awareness of the potency of engaging in dialogue is crucial in my attempts to legitimise my own voice and in my desire to occupy some intellectual space in my chosen field.*

### THE WORDS

Autoethnographic paper, language as discourse, dialogue, multiple realities

### I HAVE A STORY

I write  
Then I hear other voices and I can't stop them from  
Ringing, echoing, thundering,  
Drowning my slowly fainting voice!  
I write and speak on, louder  
And my voice grows more distinct, more defiant.  
I am legitimate and I can speak  
Like them,  
With them,  
Against them.  
They're inseparable, inescapable I know.  
They're with me, in me.  
I will carve my own space.  
I will write.  
I will speak.

Joan Valenzuela

Many of us are profoundly interested in reading life stories. It fascinates (and gratifies) us to peer through the inner lives of the now towering and prominent figures in various fields, who used to be rather small and unknown—thus, for us, nonexistent. We are startled and exclaim “really!” upon our discovery of an A-list Hollywood actor who used to work as an ordinary waiter, a critically acclaimed autobiographer and seasoned pedagogue who juggled his work on the docks and studies, a billionaire who dropped out of college, or a world-renowned black movement leader whose functional vocabulary was limited to cursing words and who was once America’s most feared hustler. They made history and we are drawn to their more personal histories, their humble beginnings as the cliché goes. Engrossed with these personalities, we commit into our memories signature words spoken by these people and quote them to *ordinary* people; or rather, their words leave an indelible mark in our lives, sometimes to the extent that we use these words as guides in making our life choices.

And then once in a while we pause and think: Had these people not succeeded, their once unheard stories would have surely not mattered, and, thus, remained untold. We think again and wonder.

Each life story, I believe, matters and may be put into writing for various purposes: to pass time, pay the bills, meet job requirements, obtain a degree, or gain access to a community of writers. More than these, the most serious writers write for a simple yet noble objective. They write simply to let their stories be known because of an irrepressible urge to let them out. One of these people is my friend, Chuah Guat Eng, a Malaysian novelist in English, who once told me she had to tell her story because she would have gone mad if she had not. Her novel is now critically acclaimed locally and overseas. Having published her story, she remains saner than ever.

I will not lose my sanity if I delay or do not tell my story as a budding academic researcher, but I will suffer the pains of intellectual self-deprivation and repression. Why will I opt for such sufferings when I have the liberty not to? When there are fruits to reap in doing so? In telling my story I will have a deepened understanding of myself. In writing my story I will come to terms with my own subjectivities. In recounting my story I may inspire the *others* who like me can choose to project their voices and be heard, and legitimise a discourse so personal and so authentic it cannot and should not be muted.

I wish to share my story as a young, passionate academic researcher who attempts to come as close as possible to the multiple realities in the “languaged” worlds around me. In capturing and representing these realities, I believe my voice is an indispensable tool. In my search for my distinct voice, I always find myself in inescapable conversations between me and myself, me and Sumi (my mentor), me and the people in the texts, and me and the others. From these inevitable conversations emerges my own distinctive voice, both an unfinished product and an on-going process of understanding who I am as a knowing subject. The stories I will make public are my celebration of the “I”, which I argue should not be silenced because doing so renders my stories lifeless, artificial and even illegitimate.

I have my own history, a part of me I cannot ignore, which is worth revisiting to understand who I am. So, let me begin with the very beginning: who I was.

## **GENESIS: HEAR MY STORIES OUT**

I used to fear doing research. Doing research, I thought, conjured up daunting images of cerebral activities: perusing virtually undecodable books on philosophy (what is epistemology? ontology? methodology? positivism? postmodernism?); synthesising ideas from notes and setting forth an argument that some research area is underexplored or completely uncharted; weeding out inconsistencies while rewriting a paper for the *n*th time; struggling to take another research path once trapped in a seemingly dead end; and conforming to conventions set by discourse communities, or attempting to resist them. I felt I was ill prepared to perform these cerebral tasks not because I was intellectually unripe or too young but I figured I lacked some implements which I think are crucial for anybody who is serious about scholarship.

With fear of doing research also comes my penchant for it. Though daunting, research when done well and seriously is an affirmation of a genuine academic. Well-written research opens up a new landscape for professional growth, provides access to respected scholarly communities and contributes to the ongoing knowledge construction—or deconstruction—and expansion in a particular discipline. I imagine myself as a co-creator of knowledge, taking on a more active role, not just someone who delivers knowledge in its various forms in various ways to the so-called less knowledgeable others in the classroom. Besides, by nature, I am rather inquisitive. I do not halt when getting answers like yes or no, true or false, right or wrong. There have to be deeper answers aside from these binaries that are often perceived as the way the world is constituted. I find joy in finding alternatives to doing things, of taking peripheral trajectories, of defying mainstream thinking and knowing, of welcoming hybridity and fluidity of truths that are constantly recreated and challenged in borderless intellectual fields.

So when did this fear of and liking for research begin? I was at the Ateneo de Manila University, a highly regarded Jesuit-run higher learning institution in Manila, for a three-summer (2004-2007) non-thesis master's degree programme. On my first day I was scared to discover that doing master's boils down to writing papers. Not just writing, but purely academic writing. I was ill-equipped for writing academically. My early education and undergraduate days did not provide me with a repertoire of writing and research skills broad enough to meet the high, uncompromising standards set by the Atenean graduate education. In an unpublished essay I passed to Sumi, my research mentor, on 8 November 2008, I confessed:

My fears stem from several traumatic writing experiences.

In grade school, my lousy writing teacher ordered me to copy last year's best students' essays as my own. At eleven, I perfectly knew it was a teacher's misconduct, but I did not realise (until I was taking up my master's at a reputable university in Manila four years ago) the repercussions of this horrible "teaching practice" on me as an academic writer.

My high school writing experiences were not much different from those of grade school. No, my English teacher was not that lousy—

lousiness is making a teacher's life a lot easier by resorting to backward pedagogical rituals—but she barely motivated me to see writing as a regular, integral part of my life. She marked my essays, but it took time, weeks and months, after we had moved to another topic, leaving behind the lapses in my papers that should have been addressed immediately within the contexts they were produced. I wrote and wrote and was made to believe I could write well. After all at the end of each year, she gave me the highest mark among my classmates. Deep down inside I was unhappy.

Despite the early ugly and disconcerting writing episodes in my life, I still loved English. In 1998, having decided to quit Commerce, I majored in English, hoping to land on a richer and more nourishing field for improving my English. I liked English and my belief that I could be good at writing was still somewhere inside me. During my final year I had to write my thesis on literature with a classmate, but to my utter surprise we were assigned a research adviser who was a chemistry professor. After a few weeks of false starts and bewilderment, we sought a new adviser, a PhD in English literature candidate, who was at that time working on a critical survey of Philippine writings across the Philippines' literary periods. She suggested that we do a similar study. I did. My partner generously shouldered all the expenses. In 2001, a few days before I had been conferred a bachelor's degree in English, I completed the work (thanks to my adviser who filled in most of the gaps, in other words, doing much of the job herself) for the sake of completing it, totally aware I did a half-baked job.

Though my personal mentor in the Philippines would often say, without any disbelief, that I have “it”—potential to be a scholar—my cynical self often prevailed and overpowered me. I felt such cynicism because I knew what I did not have at that time: I did not have a tight grasp of the conventions of research.

Enrolled in three core courses every summer, I had to make several trips to the library, hunt for books listed on one page attached to the course outline, grapple with texts populated with words and discourses that did not make sense to me, and write three 15-page papers, single-spaced. Oftentimes with less than a week before the deadline, I was still struggling to nail down elusive thesis statements, stretch them by citing authoritative sources, stick to academic conventions—some of which were new to me—and make sure my presence was felt in these papers. Entirely theoretical in content, these papers were overwhelming for me; I felt drained and doubted my own capacity to write. Wrestling with self-disbelief exacerbated the pain of writing. One hot sticky afternoon, pressured with neck-high academic work to finish, I found myself on the brink of giving up.

I did not surrender. I stayed intrinsically motivated. I clung to my dream. I pressed on. After three summers of striving, I noticed a dramatic improvement in the way I wrote, a marked difference in the way I approached the subjects in my paper. One of my professors, I recall, awarded a full mark to my synthesis paper on

the importance of *input* in language acquisition, commenting “very good writing skills”. These four words reverberated in my head throughout that day. An affirmation. These four words confirmed that I had attained some degree of sophistication in weaving lengthier and meatier academic prose. I felt I was an achiever. Now, when I look back on the pre-Atenean schooling years, I marvel at how immensely I have changed. It took one driving force to keep me moving on: motivation, the type that emanates from deep down within.

But I could not empty my mind of the if-I-had-gone-for-thesis thought that haunted me throughout the last six years I taught in a college after obtaining my master’s degree and in a new college I joined in Manila the next year. I quit my well-paying job in Manila after a year because some of my intellectual needs were not met there. I wanted to do research, but there was no space for such pursuits in that workplace. One morning while relishing my favourite liberally honeyed pancakes at Jollibee (akin to McDonalds), I spotted an advertisement in a daily newspaper that raised the possibility that I could go to Malaysia and teach at a university where I could carry out research. So here I am now; a few months after my arrival in the university here in Malaysia, I finally dared to do what I both feared and liked. I was reborn.

### **PRE-WRITING: TALKING, TALKING, TALKING**

Sumi: Joan, you have to discover who you are. Are you a reader, a talker, or a writer?

Joan: I think I am a talker; yes, I’m a talker. I talk a lot!

I can still recall these words from Sumi, my research mentor, last year in her office. Yes, I am a talker—and, of course, a listener. It has been enlightening to be able to talk with Sumi. In an email, I conveyed my frustration as I struggled to find the theoretical framework my study would be hinged upon. I wrote to Sumi:

30 November 2009

Dear Sumi,

I’m in my office now hunting for related studies and sound theories to support my study. While doing this “hunting”, the fact of how mentally draining—at the same time exciting especially when I come across interesting research findings—research is, is now sinking into my brain more deeply than ever! ...

I’m looking for theories on motivation, self-concepts, and identity. Right now I have an idea how to create a “story” in my review of lit, but honestly it’s still a bit hazy, blurred ...

I’m welcoming all these research experiences, nice or ugly. I know it’s all part of the painful process (the same experience my participants are going through now; they’re struggling to follow a research path/direction, so am I, too.)

Best wishes,

Joan

Sumi wrote back to me:

1 December 2008

Dear Joan,

Good Luck! I believe that when one embarks on this journey of “doing research”, he/she must learn to “embrace uncertainty”. I’m still struggling with it!

Regards,

Sumi

“Talking” with Sumi did wash away some of the anxieties and uncertainties inside me. Her admission of her own struggles as a researcher who has a lot more experience than I do allayed my fears, suggesting that I just had to forge on, no matter what. It means a lot to hear other people share the painful process of doing research.

Equally rewarding is talking with less experienced researchers. My first conference paper was conceived from my nightly conversations with my new Pakistani acquaintances at a campus cafeteria. These I captured in my journal as follows:

The most interesting, intriguing folks here are the Pakistani guys, many of whom are my friends ... At the moment, many of them are drafting/revising their research proposals for their PhD (I.T., E.E., E-commerce, etc.). One student is J1 who self-corrects his English whenever he speaks to me, but I think he doesn’t do it to others (friends) ... One interesting conversation we had is about their notion and my notion of girlfriend. In broken, almost unintelligible English, they told me the word doesn’t exist in their culture. (Joan, Journal Entry (JE), 11 November 2008)

... I’m deeply interested in these Pakistanis: their culture, beliefs, social practices, and most especially their language use. As you know, I’ve done my initial moves to probe their writing practices, by almost always alluding to their language use/difficulties in our nightly conversations. Yes, we meet nightly, and if I had a recorder now, I’d have captured tidbits of naturally occurring phenomena that may have reflected their knowledge, if not their skills, of academic writing. (Joan, JE, 13 November 2008)

My curiosity about these fresh PhD students had grown immensely, especially after they themselves expressed their disquieting concerns about their English writing skills. Over lunches during those times I remember my conversations with my colleagues in the department on what it takes to dare to do a PhD. We all agreed one has to possess a repertoire of academic writing and thinking skills in English. I asked myself, how can they do a PhD? How do they write, given their self-confessed inadequate writing skills in English? (Later I gave them free lessons on basic academic writing thrice a week.) This abstract “how” intrigued and hit me at a personal level. Every time a colleague or a friend asks me about my PhD plans, I say I need to write first, meaning do research, hoping that over time I will be able to

polish my writing skills and step up to some level of sophistication in concretising and structuring the often abstract ideas in my head. Such sophistication presupposes a constant striving, so I always see myself not enrolling in a PhD programme until the time comes when I can think and write in a scholarly fashion.

I would talk with myself most especially when I ran around the lake on campus after my eight-to-five work. Oftentimes the inner talking took place effortlessly. Surprisingly, the biggest and most novel ideas rush into my mind during these times when I don't think about my research on purpose at all. (In the office in front of my computer I would often agonisingly think of a next word, or a sentence, or a section in the paper only to end up having strained eyes and telling myself: This is enough!) Often the harder I think, the less unproductive I am. One time in the midst of around-the-lake running, an idea suddenly entered my mind and I could not help but exclaim "yes", with a triumphant, smiling face. I noticed some other runners throw quizzical looks at me. Anxious that my idea might slip away, I sprinted back home and put the newest idea down in my notebook, in which other randomly scribbled ideas awaited sorting out.

Many sheets of paper were testaments to the internal "dialoguing" I had had with myself. The messiness of my handwritten notes shows concrete evidence of how I freely allowed ideas to flow in and out of my inner consciousness. I rethought my own thoughts; I questioned my own arguments; I felt the thrill of novel ideas spring up; I marvelled at the insights I never saw before; I drew connections among the dots that first seemed divergent; I painted a bigger mental picture of my own paper; and, finally, I decided on the path I wished to take.

I talked privately with people I met in the texts. Often, my conversations with these people were punctuated with oohs and ahs, loud yeses, and I-got-its. Often, too, frustratingly, my readings were barely productive, cramming my mind with obscurities, more questions like "how?" and "why?" than answers. Despite these occasional setbacks, I read on. Oh, how many books and articles did I read to produce a 17-page case study on the academic writing practices of two postgraduate students? Through hours and hours of reading days and nights, Benedict Anderson (1991), Albert Bandura (1997), Pierre Bourdieu (1993), Suresh Canagarajah (2003), Mary Lea (2006), Brian Street (2003), Lev Vygotsky (1962), Etienne Wenger (1998), and many others *spoke* with me. Fuelled by my desire to read everything and hoping to locate my research in a sea of literature on the subject, I allowed myself to engage in cacophonous conversations with the people in these texts. I responded to them.

Of all these people one struck me most: Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984). I had no inkling that my readings would take me as far as Russia and lead me to borrowing Bakhtin's dialogical lenses to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the language phenomena I was probing in my first research project. Though Bakhtin's dialogism is not the primary undergirding theory in my study, it occurred to me that his notion of dialogism has been an inseparable element in the entire process of doing and writing research. Looking back on how I conducted my study, I experienced a totally different consciousness of the subtlety of the dialogic sensibilities in me as I hurdled the roadblocks towards the finish line. His thoughts on the dialogic nature of language made me think, write, and do research in a totally

new light. My “conversations” with Bakhtin opened up a new vista on knowing, its endlessness. They are constructed from the ideas of Bakhtin.

Bakhtin (1981, p. 343): The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own: it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally: We encounter it with its authority already fused to it—it demands our unconditional allegiance.

Joan: I understand. I think it’s a huge challenge to challenge dominant discourses especially when you don’t possess Bourdieu’s cultural capital. There’s so much marginalisation and oppression going on in various disciplines. I always believe there’s still an intellectual space inhabited by the gatekeeping few somewhere at the centre, no matter how small, that we from the peripheries can attempt to move to and occupy slowly. We exist to speak and we must not submit to dominant discourses.

Bakhtin (1981, p.166): The word in language is half someone else’s. It become “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent ... adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language ..., but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own ... [But] expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.

Joan: This is partly what my poem above is saying. I do not own my word completely; it is others’ as well. I do acknowledge the impact of the words of others on mine. In fact, such acknowledgement is inevitable. True, appropriating another’s word or discourse is “difficult and complicated” because we do have an internal discourse which is partially ours. Isn’t appropriating others’ discourse stifling sometimes? Isn’t it allowing us to be exploited in reproducing and maintaining discourses that result in others’ illegitimacy and powerlessness? For example, qualitative researchers—especially non-PhD holders—like me are often denied publication because they choose to write their research in a creative and subjective storytelling fashion, allowing the pronoun “I” to be heard, felt, and acknowledged as crucial in capturing multiple realities in a given research setting.

Bakhtin: Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world. The ultimate word of the world and about the world has yet to be spoken. The world is open and free. Everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.

Joan: As long as knowers breathe, knowing will not cease: there will be a constant construction and deconstruction of knowledge. I would

like in my own little way to participate in these endless pursuits of knowing.

Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, the heart of his theory of language as discourse, as illustrated in the above "conversations", proves to be instrumental in giving birth to new ideas. Additionally, making these ideas grow and expand entails constant and further dialoguing. When I told my colleague that I am intrinsically Bakhtinian, I have to say I was, am, and will always be. In fact, all of us who are capable of using language ceaselessly engage in multifarious forms of dialogic communication. Dialoguing is not new. It has been a natural phenomenon since time immemorial, dating back to the earliest times when cerebral, creative and cultured bipeds walked this planet and felt a need to devise a language to make sense of their environment and their existence. Whenever we use a language, we become dialogical. We utter a word in response to others' words. As Holquist (2002) said, responding for Bakhtin means living; the moment people stop responding, they perish. I became more conscious of these realities as I drafted my paper over and over again, painfully.

#### **WRITING THE CONVERSATIONS OUT. AT LAST!**

Writing takes time; how much time varies from one person to another. In my case, I had to revisit my early writing experiences, engage in a great deal of conversation with myself and with the *others*, in my immediate writing context and beyond, at different periods of time just to be able to convince myself to finally sit down and write my thoughts. Writing is never easy; I have come to realise that writing as a social activity will always inevitably involve a relationship between me and many others characterised by a series of episodes of struggles, a cycle of meaning-making filled with tensions, uncertainties, and doubts.

At no other phase in conducting my first research project did I ever keep in touch with myself as deeply, listening to my own voice most heedfully, permitting my subjectivities to give rise to my 17-page paper. Still fresh in my memory was the foggiest moment in writing this paper, the theoretical framework. I wrote: "... Yes, an idea came. The four theories I first thought I would use would not fit together. I tried thinking through the data I had, the literature I surveyed, and the theories I thought of. Complete haze! ..." (Joan, JE, 10 December 2008).

In these moments of utter haze I did most seriously and poignantly have a conversation with myself. In these tear-jerking moments, when I was at the verge of stopping, my cynical self surfaced once again, shrouding the remaining glimmer of hope I had inside me.

I spent my Saturday and Sunday thinking painfully on how I'd go about doing my research. When I look back on how much I accomplished for the past 30 days, I feel frustrated, sad, and anxious about what lies ahead. Will I be able to write and finish the paper? ... I am beginning to doubt again my own abilities, question my intellectual capacity. (Joan, JE, 14 December 2008)

Yet, the other self of mine breathed new life into my languishing body, refusing to succumb to the strangling effect of cynicism. Thus, I wrote:

But my desire to prove something for myself and my knowledge that research is one of the most difficult tasks to do in the world comfort me and keep me going. So I spent hours and hours of rethinking and redoing my abstract and pondering the theoretical framework. I knew something was problematic ... I was seeing some light and route which I could take ... I went back to the office and downloaded papers. I was in high spirits once again! .... (Joan, JE, 14 December 2008)

Like many beginning researchers, I was a little vulnerable to sharp criticisms from people with whom I shared my ongoing work. On one occasion, a co-worker with a PhD in engineering blatantly attacked my work in public, questioning the validity of my case study. Since it was not the proper forum to defend my research to a seemingly positivist and hard science-oriented person with 20 years of research experience (as he condescendingly informed me), I chose to remain silent. Deep inside I felt insulted. To myself I said:

... I was attacked by my co-worker ... He told me my paper is not valid because I had only two cases; I have to have at least 30 participants. Also he said I needed to use statistics to validate my arguments. Okay, quantitative research .... (Joan, JE, 13 January 2009)

Unexpectedly, my co-worker's uncalled-for assault turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Though his words seemed to topple the already neat pile of ideas in my head by hitting the very foundation of it—the methodology—I built up on what I think was also a “valid” way of discovering the truths and presenting them in my own way. His razor-sharp criticisms made me go back to the unique principles, assumptions and methods of knowing of qualitative research.

Rejuvenating me once again were the words of my mentor Sumi. The truth is I could not possibly write the next “word” in my paper without her. She is both a source of inspiration and challenge. At one point when I was completely dazed, she explained to me how important it is to justify how a theory or a group of theories, if it is really called for, underpins a study. Once again our conversation was insightful:

Sumi: Whenever you use a theory in any research, it will not fit one hundred percent and that is why you need to borrow. Or if you don't borrow then you just say this part is not captured in Wenger's framework ... community of practice theory. However this is what you found out, so probably this is the additional part that you need to include ...

Joan: So that's why I want to write the theoretical underpinning ... I want to put them together like that [shows a diagram of theories that I supposed were complementing each other] ... They are interconnected.

Sumi: If you put it together in this way then when you write you need to explain why it is like that, why it is interrelated ... When you look at the data see if they are captured in all these four ... Let's say you bring in Bandura's social learning theory, then you must justify that it is not

captured in Wenger's theory. You cannot just bring in another theory because it's convenient ....

Joan: So if you are a reader ... why are you using so many theories?

Sumi: Exactly! That will be one of the questions then because I will say like, Are you sure you cannot find a theory that captures all these?

Joan: So theories should complement each other ...

Sumi: ... Like for example, mine, I use communities of practice ... Three theories, but you know I started with communities of practice and then I said I think Wenger's identity theory doesn't capture power relationships ....

In addition, I recall her telling me that there are days when you only manage to write a paragraph, other days two or three; some other days you are happy to compose a whole essay only to junk three-fourths of it all on that same day or the following. I found solace in her sharing the pains of doing a PhD: dead ends, anxieties and multiple revisions, almost endless. She made it. Then I will make it, too. Moreover, I was consoled by my colleague, whom I admire, passing me a pat-on-the-back comment, "You're on the right track!" every time I would recount to her my weekends of suffering, of connecting the dots that used to be non-existent in the first place. Were it not for these words, I do not know if I could have even typed the next word in my paper.

Not all conversations with Sumi were smooth. When I handed my paper to her for her feedback, I noticed some differences in the way we structured our thoughts. For example, I wondered why the word "stretch" seemed to be a less appropriate academic term than "expand", which Sumi suggested I use instead. To myself, I thought the former, though a little less academic sounding is metaphoric and creates a clearer picture of what I meant, as in the following fragment: "... stretch the notion of power, identity, and linguistic competence." I felt that using metaphoric language could be useful in getting a message across to my reader. Another instance in which I could hardly say yes to her at once was when she suggested making "things explicit in my paper", which is her practice. I think there is nothing wrong with that. Her style is absolutely legitimate. However, I personally felt that too much explicitness might dampen my writing as a whole. I understand where she was coming from. It is true that academic communities maintain and promote their own conventions and these sometimes (until now) I have a hard time coming to terms with.

In all, I wrote at least eight drafts of my first paper before I stood in front of eight people who listened to my presentation at an international conference here in Malaysia a few months back. In retrospect, I feel amazed by the amount of energy I expended, the length of time I put in, and the degree of openness I demonstrated in attempting to make meaning out of what used to appear to be meaningless at first sight.

### **I KNEW I WAS NOT DONE YET ...**

Dialoguing again and again, as I have illustrated in this paper, cannot be removed from the entire process of doing research. Dialoguing is always filled with tensions and conflicts. By responding, questioning, doubting, arguing, debunking, and welcoming rough encounters in communication, better tools of knowing are devised and new knowledge is created.

Writing my 17-page paper, which remains “unfinished” in a Bakhtinian sense, has been a trek back from my beginnings as a writer towards the present, and perhaps a little step forward to the future. It took me time to write. I had to look back on who I was as a struggling academic writer—I still struggle to this very moment and I strive hard—to understand the present writer that I am. Then as I drafted my paper slowly and arduously, trying many times to say what I really wanted to say, I had to talk with myself, respond to my mentor, react to the people behind the books and articles I leafed through, and show openness to what my colleagues and other people said. Sometimes, these conversations were draining and fruitless; oftentimes, they were invigorating and productive. In the end, one realisation has been indelibly inked in my mind: I just have to carry on dialoguing.

I came back from the conference and brought with me my listeners’ feedback: “Tidy up a little bit on your theoretical framework and consider getting published,” one commented. “Your study is quite interesting; your university should seriously address that problem,” another added. True enough, when I went over my paper, heeding the feedback of a listener, I thought some polishing had to be done in the theoretical underpinning section of my paper. I knew changing a portion of a paper means doing revisions in several other parts of it. I have to do revisions again, rethink ways to say what I wish to say. In the process I would surely gain new insights and create fresh knowledge.

And yes, needless to say, I am to dialogue with the others once again.

### **Notes**

1. In my attempt to produce creative academic writing, I deliberately took flight from the conventional structure and style of a research paper. I embedded the theoretical framework subtly into this paper midway through it via pseudo-dialogues between me and Bakhtin.
2. Indulging in metaphors to capture the rich textures of my experiences as an academic writer, I drew the data from my research diary, research notes, recorded conversations with my mentor, and casual talk with other people.
3. Though I did not cite the authors in some of the references listed below, the work is relevant to my argument in this paper.

### **MANY THANKS**

To the *others* (breathing and departed),

Thanks for the insightful conversations. Sans these conversations I would have not written the 6,000 plus words in this paper.

Best,

Joan

P.S.: In the spirit of dialogism, I have to specially mention here that my reading of Ms. Chong Su Li's paper entitled *No Last Words* (2009) accidentally (finally after months of incubation) spurred the writing of this paper. Thanks, Su Li. Of course, though I did give Dr. Sumathi Renganathan full recognition for her contribution to my first academic paper in the body of this paper, I feel I need to conform to a convention, to acknowledge her in this section. Many thanks, Sumi.

#### ABOUT ME

Joan Rocafort Valenzuela teaches English language courses to undergraduate engineering students at Universiti Teknologi Petronas in Malaysia. Using contemporary social theories, he is interested in qualitative research on literacy practices inside and outside the classrooms.

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