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An unexpected journey: From typing to dictating a thesis

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An unexpected journey: From typing to dictating a thesis

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Abstract

Unexpected twists and turns on the PhD journey can be directly related to the research itself, while others are related to the experience of the journey. For me, the most unexpected aspects were related to my health and saw me transition from writing and typing to dictating to the computer. This autoethnographic article is based on the lived experience of this unexpected journey and explores the implications for this necessary change in procedure. Implications included learning new processes for writing, transcribing interviews and controlling the computer by voice. Consideration of this experience viewed through Heidegger's ontological concept of being helped ease frustrations brought on by this unexpected twist. Becoming aware of the skills mentioned above may help others with accessibility issues, and reflection on the PhD journey from the perspective of this article may help others make sense of frustrations related to their own experiences.

Keywords

Accessibility; dictation; voice recognition technology

The issue

Unexpected twists and turns on the PhD journey can be directly related to the research or the experience of the journey itself. The most unexpected aspects of my journey were related to my health and saw me transition from writing and typing to dictating to the computer. A key theorist I used to make sense in my thesis work was Martin Heidegger (1967). Heidegger set out to explore the ontological concept of being (to be read as existing [Heidegger, 1967; Wheeler, 2011]). He proposed the concept of time as a starting point to begin to understand the concept of existing. In this article, I also use Heidegger's work to make sense of my experience of existing on my unexpected journey, but first, I will provide more information about the issue.

During the data collection phase in the first year of my PhD, I began transcribing interviews to produce typed transcripts. This action saw the development of overuse issues in my wrists and forearms. I was in constant pain, and when I typed, it felt like I was moving my fingers in cement. The doctors'



diagnoses varied until a musculoskeletal specialist identified a myofascial pain issue. They explained that the muscles of my forearms were locked in a fight or flight response and were unable to relax by themselves; using my arms for the thesis activated and compounded the situation.

Throughout my life, my hands and arms have been essential tools. I am a creative person who used my hands for crafting, making and writing. As a partner and mum, I used my arms for cooking, cleaning, helping, comforting and playing. As a researcher, I was using my arms to greet participants, drive into the field, hold gear, turn pages, use the computer and physically write. At the apex of this issue, it hurt to turn a door handle or push the button to flush the toilet.

I share this information to demonstrate that this unexpected twist affected all aspects of my life, not only the part of me that was a PhD candidate. I was angry, I cried, and at some points I felt helpless. I was scared that there were activities that were important to me that I would have to give up to be able to complete the PhD, and I was scared about how continuing on this journey would affect my quality of life long-term. My fears and hopes were either comparisons to the past or projected to the future; they contained the concept of time Heidegger (1967) proposed as a starting point to begin to understand the concept of existing.

Voice recognition technology

Choosing to continue with the PhD meant finding a comfortable and sustainable way forward, so I began to explore how to use voice recognition technology (VRT) to do computer work. I used VRT to continue transcription, take field notes, dictate and edit the thesis. I engaged the free Ease of Access software on my laptop and tried dictating in Word for my first attempt. This technology provided me with some hope but increased frustration because my accuracy was only 70%, and I could not work at the speed I had previously. I had to learn the commands for the computer and the names of punctuation that I never had to verbalise before; until that time, I just wrote a symbol or pushed the button on the keyboard.

The use of VRT to help ease the physical discomfort of typing has been referenced by research (Anderson, 1998; Honeycutt, 2003; Johnson, 2011; Matheson, 2007). VRT has also been explored as a tool to increase the speed of transcription (Anderson, 1998; Fletcher & Shaw, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Matheson, 2007), to aid second language learners with their pronunciation (Fletcher & Shaw, 2011) and to help provide clarity for writing in instances of neural diversity such as dyslexia (Fletcher & Shaw, 2011; Honeycutt, 2003). All articles comment on an initial investment in time to teach the program your voice and perseverance through the frustration of learning something new. Advice in literature to increase accuracy is to enunciate more clearly but speak naturally with smooth complete sentences (Anderson, 1998; Fletcher & Shaw, 2011; Honeycutt, 2003; Matheson, 2007). This process differed from my initial experience of writing, and I began to understand the distinction between physical (silent) writing and “oral composition” (Honeycutt, 2003, p. 80). My experience of physical writing was that words would flow, but I could stop and start as desired; now, I needed to form complete sentences in my head before I spoke, or any pauses or misspoken words could lead to more editing and proofreading, slowing the process further.

To continue transcribing data, I used one device to slow down the recording, which played into my earphones while I spoke the recording to the computer. I have since learned this is called the “listen and repeat” technique (Fletcher & Shaw, 2011; Matheson, 2007). For me, this was quicker than typing because it was like reading; the words were already waiting for me. I did not have to compose sentences as I went. In the field, while collecting data, I used Google's free voice-to-text software to take notes in Google Docs on my phone. Because of the low initial accuracy when dictating, I began to use keywords and phrases instead of complete sentences. Using keywords and phrases meant my mental load increased because I had to remember to what those keywords and phrases referred. It is worth noting that I am terrible at spelling, but when I finally took time to teach the software my voice, it helped provide clarity in my writing; the software learned my vocabulary and accent and could understand what I was saying

in context. I still needed to learn to spell keywords that I pronounce the same way, such as principal and principle, but the accuracy of the dictation increased. Unexpectedly, increasing accuracy by practising my pronunciation and enunciation was also good practice for presentations as I had to learn to keep a consistent speed and speak very clearly.

As my journey progressed, I began using a noise-cancelling Bluetooth earpiece to communicate with my computer and paid for Nuance's Dragon Professional Individual software. With Dragon I could edit documents by voice and dictate with more than 90% accuracy. The editing functions of Dragon allowed me to use my voice to move the cursor throughout the document, select, move, delete, and correct text. I could also add comments for my supervisors, accept changes and modify font and style with my voice. A quiet environment is required when using VRT (Fletcher & Shaw, 2011; Matheson, 2007). Writing with my voice deprivatised my practice by making it audible to those around me. In another unexpected twist, I worked from my home office instead of an office at the university because I did not want to disturb or be disrupted by others. Dictating instead of typing the thesis has been isolating and not how I had imagined my PhD journey would go.

A theory

My thesis explored the experiences of principals, teachers and students in schools transitioning from traditional single cell classrooms to large open-plan flexible learning environments. Many who participated in my study spoke in comparison to their previous experiences of education and previous classrooms or the potential they imagined was possible in their new learning environment. To be effective teachers or learners in the new learning environments, my research participants had to modify their teaching and learning practices and align them with the affordances of the new classroom spaces. Some expressed tension and frustration at having to do this when they had already been effective in their previous classroom. I saw my frustrations at having to learn new processes and modifying my practice echoed in my participants' experiences. In the first section of this article, I conveyed that my hopes and fears were often comparisons to the past or predictions for the future; the same was true of my participants' comments. Our experiences of existing (and associated frustrations), as Heidegger (1967) anticipated, were shaped by ideas that contained the concept of time.

Heidegger (1967) suggested that as we experience the world and come across anything outside of ourselves (entities) we interpret those entities and give them meaning. The meaning a person gives an entity is shaped by many different aspects, such as the location (in time and space), culture and previous experiences with similar entities (Heidegger, 1967; Wheeler, 2011; Wollan, 2003). Entities are often associated with or linked to other entities; Heidegger referred to this as the *totality of involvement* of that entity. In my thesis, the entity under consideration for my participants was education. The totality of involvement of education was everything involved in that process (educators, learners, content and resources); this included what happened within the classroom and outside of it, how education was talked about with colleagues, and what was reported about education in media and research. For myself, it was research and everything that entailed, especially where traditionally my hands would have been involved.

Reading further on Heidegger's concept of being brought me to the idea of a person's "concrete situation" which Wollan (2003) proposed helps shape their interpretation of their existence, the of idea being.

There is no such thing as presupposition less, "prejudiceless" interpretation ... The interpreter cannot free himself from his own facticity, from the ontological condition of always already having a finite temporal situation as a horizon within which the beings he understands have their initial meaning for him. (p. 32)

In the above quote *beings* should be read as *entities*. This quote suggests that a person can never free themselves from their first experience of an entity; for example, what my participants knew of education or what I knew of and how I had learned to do research.

When I considered my unexpected journey from typing to dictating a thesis through the idea of a concrete situation, it gave me pause. My frustrations stemmed from constant comparisons, but this was pointless because it was physically impossible for me to *write* my thesis the same way I had written research before. The same was true for my participants. They had to modify their teaching and learning practices because they only had the large open-plan learning environment available, and change was required to be effective in the modified space. Maybe we needed to show ourselves more compassion, take the lessons from our past experiences, reflect and redefine our values and goals, and learn to adapt to achieve those goals instead of letting any frustrations shape our experiences of existing.

Conclusion

I have shared unexpected twists from my PhD journey. I hope that reading about different VRT and ways VRT can be employed to transcribe interviews, take field notes, dictate and edit documents, practise speed and pronunciation for presentations and provide clarity in writing may help others on their PhD journey. I hope that by reading about my experience, others with accessibility issues may be inspired to find a solution to their problem by exploring different software and technology options. I wonder if others could find meaning in their unexpected journey by considering it through their participants' experiences or what they read or notice from literature related to their own research. Perhaps consideration of their PhD journey from the perspective of this article may help others make sense of frustrations related to their own experiences.

I have composed this article by dictation. I have received comments on my thesis that my writing is more conversational than academic at times; this will be because I am literally speaking my writing. This is the current part of my process that I am trying to modify to proceed with my goal of completing my PhD. A further unexpected twist is that my speaking can sound more like dictation than conversation, especially when I have been focused on writing all day and greet my family with verbal punctuation when they get home. Hello comma how are you question mark new line tell me something that happened during your day period.

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