

The Ethnographer Unbared: Revealing Insider Knowledge of Cultural Adaptation

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Abstract: This is my story of how I, a teacher in an Australian university, and twelve students from Timor Leste negotiated cultural difference and gained a deeper understanding of ourselves and each other—and the lesson the story has for researchers. Using autoethnography and structured vignette analysis, I show how each of us evolved coping strategies to deal with our different cultural expectations, and in the process experienced enlightenment and personal transformation. Phenomenology and in particular autoethnography are well suited not only to understanding the interaction between researcher and the researched, but also the role that researcher self-awareness plays in the process of cultural adaptation. To gain perspective on the student experience, I undertook a case study by conducting a focus group and individual interviews. For the students, learning how to exist in Australian culture became the hidden curriculum. For me, understanding the impact of the cultural distance between teacher and students became imperative as the tension between their wellbeing and my own gathered momentum. This demonstrates how the initially separate cultural journeys of researchers and researched can come together as a shared journey of increasing self-understanding and personal growth.

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1. Introduction

The wing of the plane dips gracefully as it prepares to circle back to land at Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport in Dili, Timor Leste (Timor). Looking out the window I absorb with pleasure the tropical terrain and vegetation, the palm trees and rolling waves so typical of many Pacific countries I have visited. This is my first trip to Timor and I am travelling with university colleagues who will introduce me to the 21st Century's first new sovereign state. The year is 2012 and this is my story—a teacher from Australia researching myself teaching a group of students from Timor. The interface between these students and me as their teacher exposes the impact of cultural difference on the teacher-student relationship. Using both autoethnography (myself as the teacher) and case study (the students) as method, I reveal myself as both teacher and researcher, struggling to understand both their needs and mine, often compromising my own welfare in favour of theirs. Yet in this process I come to realise that the support I receive in return from the students sustains me throughout the course of my teaching and research. [1]

Interspersed within this story of cultural adaptation is a story of achievement, their achievement as observed by me and my own sense of joy in their success. With over 30 years' experience teaching local students, I had little understanding of teaching international students until I delivered the graduate certificate in vocational education and training (VET) to this group of twelve Timorese VET professionals. I travelled to Timor initially to meet the students and gain an understanding of their VET system. The twelve students, the youngest 27 and the oldest 58 years, then travelled to Melbourne for three months to study on campus and I returned to Timor nine months later to assess them. All of the students worked within the VET system in Timor, some in educational settings and some in the Ministry for Education. Funding for this project was provided by the Victorian state government to assist Timor in providing training for its population to rebuild the country's infrastructure. After 500 years of *laissez faire* Portuguese rule, a hostile Indonesian invasion from 1975 to 2002 resulted in twenty-five per cent of Timor's population being slaughtered and much of Dili being destroyed. An important aspect of re-building Timor was re-instating education as a fundamental right of all its citizens. My research was motivated by an interest in understanding how I responded to the cultural challenges of working with a group of indigenous students from a war-torn country, how the students coped with the cultural challenges of coming to Australia to study, and how we forged our relationship together. [2]

Anthropologist Edward T. HALL (1959) defined culture as the way people live their lives, the sum of their learned behaviour patterns and attitudes, and he argued that we become conscious of our own culture through being exposed to difference. He observed cultures according to their styles of communicating—high context (much of the information is implicit), and low context (information is mostly explicit). According to HALL (1983), high context cultures are collectivist, preferring consensus to individual achievement. They rely on intuition and feelings, and communication relies heavily on context, such as facial expressions,

tone of voice and gestures. Low context cultures, he contended, are individualistic and action orientated. Communication relies heavily on words, and decisions are more likely to be based on fact and reason rather than intuition.

Internationalisation through the ease of travel and the use of the internet has altered our sense of distinct cultural attributes as described by HALL, though it is worth noting here that I identify as being intuitive, and aware of and sensitive to feelings, facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures, which aligns more with a high context culture than a low context culture such as Australia. Perhaps this is why these students in the focus groups at the end of their study indicated they immediately felt at ease with me; they felt happy to have me as their teacher. They liked my smile they said, and that I looked them in the eye as I repeated their names to them, immediately trying to implant each of their names on my mind. They repeatedly suggested that my open, friendly approach to them assisted their integration into the mostly unknown Australian culture. AVRUCH (2004) described culture as "rooted deeply in on-going or past social practice and is to some extent situational, flexible and responsive to the exigencies of the worlds that individuals confront" (p.20). This acknowledgement by AVRUCH is particularly relevant to Timor which has had many influencing factors with the scope to impact existing culture, where power has often been denied the indigenous peoples. HOFSTEDE (2011, p.9) conceded that "[a]ll societies are unequal but some are more unequal than others". Timor has been working to restore the balance of power since independence in 2002. Australia is most often described as a culture where power is distributed more equally, but the outstanding exception is the case of the white settlers arriving in Australia and the treatment of its indigenous people. Power inequality is part of our Australian history (BLAINEY, 2014; GRANT, 2017; WOLFE, 2006) and the current power distribution privileges me as an educated fifth generation *new* Australian. [3]

2. My Practice of Autoethnography

Autoethnography retrospectively and selectively reveals experiences that have their basis in, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or owning a specific cultural identity. I contend that autoethnography is a collaborative journey between the reader and the author, drawing the reader into the inner workings of the social context studied, thereby enhancing the reader's understanding and knowledge of the culture studied. ELLIS, ADAMS and BOCHNER (2010) stated it involves writing about and critically analysing selected epiphanies that stem from interactions involving being part of a culture. It is a contentious qualitative research methodology through which researchers speak with emotion about existential experiences (ANDERSON, 2006; DENZIN, 2006; ELLIS et al., 2010). It is self-focused and context-conscious (NGUNJIRI, HERNANDEZ & CHANG, 2010; REED-DANAHAY, 1997). Above all, REED-DANAHAY believed that when critical autoethnography accounts both personal experience and cultural critique it "can contribute to our knowledge of power and social inequality" (2017, p.144). She believes critical ethnographers ask questions about the social contexts and power relations that inform the circumstances of peoples' lives. [4]

As my story unfolds you will witness the juxtaposition of the power of the teacher and that of the students as I intersperse within my writing the experiences of the students, taken from interviews and a focus group conducted at the completion of their study. However, I do not specifically focus on methodologies or presenting data; rather I focus on our ways of coping as we forge our relationship together. My tertiary teaching experience within my university is broad. I initially taught in VET (30 years ago), then as part of a team in the Career Change Program to qualify experienced workers to teach in hard to staff regional schools in Victoria, and in later years I delivered professional development to teaching staff at my university. The inherent fear I felt at teaching Timorese students stemmed from my fear of the unknown. Who were these indigenous students from this invaded and carnaged country, who had lost 25% of their population defending their freedom from the Indonesians? What was I getting myself into? I also heard disturbing stories of colleagues who came home from teaching assignments in Timor with Dengue Fever which forced them into early retirement. I packed long sleeve tops, full length trousers and 90% DEET insect repellent in my suitcase. [5]

Through a series of vignettes highlighting existential experiences between the students and myself, I take the reader on a journey of shock and challenge, tension, breakthrough and joy. Rather than adhering to conventional chronological connections, I use my structured vignette analysis framework (PITARD, 2016a) to highlight and analyse selected experiences. In my analysis I describe the context, the experience told as a personal story, the emotional impact on me of this experience and my reflexivity to the described experience. I identify strategies I developed resulting from the impact the experience had on my interactions with my students. This structured vignette analysis reinforces the necessity of all these research elements within autoethnographic writing. Some of these vignettes have appeared in my previously published articles, but here I connect the experiences to tell a story. The students had limited practice of an autonomous learning environment which they expressed quite openly to me initially in the form of shock, whenever they were asked to do something which required their own research, and again during a focus group at the completion of their study. I had limited experience teaching students with English as a second language or, as in the case of the Timor students, where English was their third language. I speak no Tetun (the shared Timorese native language), Bahasa or Portuguese. Also, I had limited experience teaching students from a culture different to my own, especially one recently traumatised by invasion and destruction. I did however have much experience in teaching transformational learning to teachers, and extensive practice in seeing myself through studying others' reactions to me. I strive to reflect on how my actions, values and perceptions react on the research setting and the research participants. The researchers' ability to know another depends inherently on their ability to know themselves. [6]

In my research I consciously aim to practise reflexivity. I constantly monitor how my own reactions affect both my teaching and my relationship with my students. Reflexivity asks the question "how does what I say, do and think influence the data?" Practising reflexivity as a daily ritual, listening to my internal dialogue as I

interact with others, has developed my knowledge of self and supported my use of autoethnography as a method. I believe that every lived experience impacts our consciousness and the way we interpret that experience will shape how we react to our lived experiences in the future. If we think about these experiences in a purely intellectual way we miss the opportunity of increased awareness, of understanding at a deeper level how this experience has impacted our being. I believe that awareness *beyond thinking* allows us to come closer to a truth that might lie beyond individual versions of the truth (PITARD, 2017), and this is how my story begins. [7]

3. The Shock of Experiencing Timor

Initially I travelled to Timor with three university colleagues—a pro-vice chancellor, a director in charge of scholarships, and an affiliate who is well known to the Prime Minister of Timor. I was approaching an unknown culture and terrain with relatively unfamiliar travel companions. We were met at Dili airport and driven to our hotel. This journey affected me deeply.

"Rubble dominates the street scenes. I have prepared myself for poverty but the site of such destruction deeply affects me. I recognise the rubble as the result of the obliteration of many buildings and utilities as the Indonesians retreated from Dili in 1999, but still I am shocked. Families have erected hovel dwellings amidst the rubble and I imagine myself waking up each morning to the task of sorting through the rubble to find suitable pieces to rebuild and then having to clear from the site the unwanted rubble. There is no machinery to assist with this. I understand the weariness in the faces we are passing. I also recognise hope in the domestic scenes flashing by. I see mothers out sweeping the ground with palm fronds around their humble makeshift dwellings. Most of the dwellings have corresponding makeshift washing lines with impeccable white washing being hung out to dry by mothers with naked children clinging to their legs. I witness pride and a desire for cleanliness against the backdrop of poverty. Whilst I am keenly observing the landscape as we drive into Dili, my attention is drawn to our driver as he edges the car dangerously into the middle of an intersection with cars driving at us from four directions. I notice non-functioning traffic lights and marvel as our driver navigates the chaos and emerges on the other side of the intersection triumphant. We pull up in the dust outside the Dili Beach Hotel. We are opposite the ocean. This brings me comfort in its familiarity amidst the confrontation to my senses of this chaotic, unequal world.

It is the destruction embodied in the amount of rubble in the streets that affronts me the most. It looks like an earthquake has struck the heart of Dili. The drive from the airport has imprinted my mind with shock at both the living conditions and the driving conditions. I feel like I will never forget this first impression of Dili. The main roads are bitumen but most side roads are compacted dirt. I am told that many of the dirt side roads simply dwindle into non-existence where structured building diminishes. There are between six and thirteen sets of traffic lights in Dili, depending on who you ask, most of which have been vandalised by locals. It seems they are satisfied with their own code of driving" (PITARD, 2016b, p.73). [8]

These first impressions of Timor shocked me; I felt affronted that humans could be so violent and destructive towards their fellow human beings. It felt different to my previous experiences of poverty and hunger. The wilful destruction shocked me in its confrontation. In comparison to the circumstances of these people, I felt privileged; and the notion of privilege has always distressed me. On reflection, I have always grappled with how to balance my place in the world in relation to "the other". I was lucky enough to be born in Australia, a prosperous, peaceful country. I have shelter, food and work. I have not done anything in particular to deserve this state of being over my fellow humans in impoverished or devastated countries; I do not feel more deserving than others, rather I feel undeservedly privileged. At this point in my cultural immersion, I was acutely aware of privilege and I felt that privilege was slanted towards my educated, disciplined world. I wanted to know more about life in Timor and more about the people whose life of hardship humbled me. [9]

4. A Humbling Breakthrough in My Cultural Understanding

Two days into my week in Dili, my colleagues and I attended an alumni dinner, organised and hosted by my university. We took a taxi to a Chinese restaurant in a part of Dili I had not visited. The restaurant was on the ground floor of a building in a street lined with two storey buildings of basic construction. Two university colleagues also attended. They were in Dili with a group of Bachelor of Education students from Melbourne undertaking their school internships in Dili. It was hot and for the first hour everyone stood around chatting and drinking.

"I am finding being on my feet very difficult. Fatigue is gripping my chest and my legs feel weak. I scan the room for a kind looking face and engage a Timorese alumna in conversation about her study and what this means to her in light of the declaration of independence in Timor in 2002. As she smiles broadly throughout our conversation, I feel the need to know how she can be happy when her country has been so devastated by invading forces. I ask if she lost family members during the invasion and massacre. Her smile disappears. I feel the blood rushing to my face as I recognise my intrusion into her private world. She describes those members of her family whose lives have been sacrificed. Almost too quickly, I express admiration for her positive attitude and, as her smile returns, she explains there is no point in looking back, that she and her people must build a new, strong nation and to do this, they need the assistance of the Indonesians. Confusion overwhelms me as I recognize my own anger towards the invaders. Grippled by fatigue, tears well in my eyes. I do not understand. I move swiftly towards the exit for a breath of fresh air" (PITARD, 2019, p.1841). [10]

I was confused by the forgiveness inherent in the Timorese attitude to the loss of family, culture and wealth and surprised by the happiness and excitement I was witnessing. Although they mourned for lost loved ones, they seemed not to place any blame as they looked to the future. It was not until a few months later when I was reading an article in *The Age* newspaper based on an interview with Rosa STORELLI (GREEN, 2013), the displaced principal of Methodist Ladies College in Kew, Victoria, that I understood this attitude at a deeper level. The author

stated his admiration that Ms. STORELLI held no ill feeling to those who had moved to displace her from her position as a successful and much-loved principal of a leading girls' school. Ms. STORELLI remarked that if she were to harbour ill feeling it would affect her ability to move forward in her life *and she would not allow anybody else to dictate her future*. I recalled my conversation with the university alumna in the restaurant in Dili and experienced an epiphany of understanding so profound I realised that the Timorese people could possibly be more deeply spiritual and wiser than me. The significance of this revelation prompted me to turn the research lens back on myself. How humbling it was to acknowledge my impertinence in believing the alumna had not given due consideration to what her people had suffered, and that my anger on her behalf was a more appropriate reaction. I was forced to acknowledge that the assumptions I had accumulated throughout my life may not serve me well in dealing with those whose life experience lies in contrast to mine. MEZIRROW's transformation as critical reflection theory (1990) enables us to detect and correct exaggerations in our beliefs and misrepresentations in our problem solving. Through critical reflection we undertake a process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience which underpins further interpretation in future experiences. I learned that if I was to serve my students' forward development, I had to cease presuming and learn to question everything before acting. In terms of coping with cultural adversity, this was very humbling and proved difficult to adopt as my next vignette demonstrates. [11]

5. The Challenge of the Timorese Students Coming to Melbourne

The Timorese students arrived in early July; winter in Melbourne. Over the first two days I settled them into their shared apartments, gave them each a mobile phone, opened their bank accounts and showed them how to use an ATM and public transport. There was only one ATM in Dili in 2012, and no ticketed public transport. Eight of the twelve students had not previously travelled outside Timor, and most of the group were unfamiliar to each other. On our first day together in a classroom, I was keen for them to get to know me and learn to trust both me and each other. I told them my story, emphasising my professional career. This very act of emphasising my professional career rather than my personal life was my first indication that I was uncertain how to relate to them. Regarding them as "the other", I was wary of getting too personal, contrary to my attempt to get them to trust me. I invited them to participate in a "get to know you" activity which I had used successfully with many past groups of students. This should have been an opportunity for real bonding and I stumbled through it in a state of uncertainty. The students were to walk in pairs to a private space anywhere in the university where they would tell their story, whatever they chose to tell, for 15 minutes without being interrupted. Their partner was to listen without taking notes and to remember as much of the story as possible so they could retell it to the wider group. The purpose of this activity is primarily to get to know each other but it also uses skills in listening without interrupting, speaking at length without prompts, and remembering salient points from a personal story. Participants could share or choose not to share aspects of their lives. There was no pressure

to disclose more than they were comfortable with. I did not foresee the emotions this activity unleashed.

"As the pairs drift back into the room, I ask for a volunteer to tell the first story. The youngest member of the group raises his hand. He stands and commences to tell the story told to him. He paints a picture of a person who has suffered under the harsh regime in TL [Timor Leste] prior to 1999, who has lost family members and close friends. About 4 minutes into his retelling he begins to sob. Tears stream down his face. My heart begins to race as I become alarmed that I am intruding into a space in his head and heart that I am not qualified to handle. I fear for him and his fellow countrymen that I am opening up wounds that are still too raw to speak about. My vision blurs as I panic and ask him to sit down. I struggle to find my voice as I apologise to the group saying I had not realised this exercise would recall experiences too difficult to speak of and that we would cease the activity and move onto something else. They sit very still looking towards me. They seem far away from me, not with me. I am not able to read their emotions from their facial expressions or body language. I suggest a twenty-minute break so we can all compose ourselves" (PITARD, 2016a, §27). [12]

I had not anticipated that the activity would awaken such memories and I asked myself why I had not foreseen this. My experience of this exercise with local students was stories of personal achievement, professional challenge, experience in vocational education, and sometimes insight into personal aspiration. Why had I not taken the time to think through the consequences of this activity to understand the volatility of the experiences that may surface in the conversations between the students from Timor? I think I got as much fright from my lack of foresight as I did from the realisation I had to handle a situation I did not feel qualified for. I am not a psychologist nor professionally qualified to deal with post-traumatic stress, which is what I instantly labelled this in my mind. I panicked. I apologised for evoking such difficult memories. I told them we would cease the activity immediately. I did not discuss this with them. I did not seek feedback or comment. I simply ceased the activity and told them to take a break. Then I moved on. [13]

It distresses me even now to think about this incident as I now feel I did not respond appropriately. In the interviews at the end of the course, one of the students told me the group was confused as to why I had stopped the activity as they had enjoyed the exchange of stories. The emotional response from the student who stood and retold his pair's story was commonplace to them. I asked myself why I did not see that also. Why did I imagine that retelling the stories in a safe environment in a faraway culture, although emotional in the recollection, might not be traumatic for them? The answer is that I have no experience to match theirs. My reaction was based on my own experience of a world where trauma is "swept under the carpet" and largely goes unacknowledged. I was 62 years of age and growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Australia (we now know) meant keeping secrets about unrepeatable misdemeanours on the vulnerable in our society. I attended Catholic primary and secondary schools and some religious personnel I came into contact with have been tried and convicted on

charges of gross indecency towards children. I have witnessed people's trauma in the media, on television and in newspapers, and personal accounts in books, blogs and articles. As an adult I acknowledge the travesty of what happened when I was a child and beyond, but faced with a situation where unspeakable violence had been imposed on the vulnerable in Timor, the child in me wanted to "sweep it under the carpet" and move on, as I had been taught to do. The social conditioning of my childhood had implicitly been reactivated. I feel shame that I was not able to stay with the students on that day and bear to hear what they wanted to tell. I feel I failed them. I feel I am a casualty of my own society yet I have spent years studying, reading, discussing and breaking down the barriers to understanding my perception of my world and how this can differ very profoundly to others' perceptions. Years of grounding collapsed in a single misunderstood interaction with a cultural "other". And I was only on my second day with these students (PITARD 2016a). [14]

I felt alone, polarised and despairing. They sat uncomfortably at their desks either occupying themselves with shallow tasks or peering at me questioningly, scanning my face for clues. They remained respectful and I apologised again, informing them I had organised for them to take a conducted tour of the library so they could find their way around the shelves of books and the computers available for student research. Their bodies moved slowly as they gathered their belongings, mocking my haste in dismissing them. I needed to concentrate on regaining control over my own anxious state. As they were walking out of the room they cast anxious glances at me. Was I not coming with them to the library? I assured them there would be someone there to guide them through the library. They hesitated. This was my second unwitting mistake for the day. Later, in the focus group, they told me in Timor the teacher always went with them. [15]

It was at this stage I inadvertently implemented strategies for cultural adaptation, later recognised and developed by PITARD and KELLY (2020) as a "Taxonomy for Cultural Adaptation". I understood in the midst of my despair that I had twelve students feeling their way in a foreign world; we were in this together. My approach to teaching is to use the Socratic method where I pose questions rather than giving students answers. I see myself as the facilitator of my students' learning using their intrinsic desire for discovery as our guide. The learning outcomes within the graduate certificate in VET allowed an approach to learning that incorporated transformational learning, student-led learning, and discovery learning. I was their guide and I could not perform miracles. However, I could enthuse them with a desire to learn which could transcend the cultural and linguistic barriers which had just overwhelmed me. When they returned after their break, I led them in a questioning exercise to identify what they felt they needed to learn. I wanted to give them control of their learning and to involve them in designing their own learning. They discussed animatedly among themselves in Tetun the various aspects of their potential learning and appointed a few spokespersons to verbalise their contributions. Writing their suggestions on the whiteboard, they provided me with a comprehensive list. I began grouping them to fit under headings identified in the learning outcomes of the graduate certificate in VET. [16]

Reflecting at the end of the day, I felt compelled to act on the despair and loneliness I experienced on that third day with my students. I understood that without immediate action my relationship with these students could falter, along with my commitment to the project. In retrospect, I am mortified at my self-absorption over the task I had undertaken. I remember feeling the responsibility on my first day with the students when we organised their bank cards, mobile phones, transport cards and food shopping, and my realisation how many of them had no experience outside Timor. I was aware of the enormous shock these students must have been feeling at being plunged from tropical heat into the cold weather of a Melbourne winter, away from the support and protection of their communities in Timor; of being exposed to independent learning within university life, and exposure to an alien city life with its unfamiliar rules and regulations. I was drowning and, although they did not verbalise this, they must have been too. [17]

Feeling that they looked to me to rescue us all, I had no choice but to initiate strategies to redeem our situation. My teaching experience ensured I could identify some helpful strategies, but I struggled to find the energy and determination to implement them. My lack of experience with international students, fear of the unknown (I could only guess how my students were feeling) and the overwhelming weight of responsibility almost destabilised the project. My advice to the novice me would have been to speak extensively with university colleagues who had training and experience in dealing with international students and seek their mentoring throughout the implementation of the project. My immediate manager was distracted by her other responsibilities and unable to give me the time or the advice that I needed. I should have persevered in finding someone within the university who could mentor me. [18]

6. Joy in Finding Mentors

In the absence of a mentor, I was guided by my intuition in my relationships with some of the students. My professional judgement assisted me to discern whether their prevailing needs were academic, physical or emotional, but I also opened my senses to what I was seeing and feeling in the classroom. Some were capable of providing for their own needs but several were lost in a sea of confusion, shyness or loneliness. Some would fall asleep in class or sit disconsolately, unable to understand much of what I was saying. I was at my most nurturing when confronted with these few students but I didn't have the strength or time to provide for their needs myself. Nor would it have been appropriate. They needed a third party to whom they could speak in confidence about their daily lives as students.

"He is gentle, thin, young and sensitive. He is skilled in English. He has studied theology and is the principal of a Catholic training college in Dili. This is his first visit to Australia. At the beginning he smiles a lot. As time progresses his smiles are more fleeting. He is troubled.

I match him with an associate director at the university who has been the director of a secondary training college although his current position within the university is not

related to this. This mentor has studied philosophy, is gentle, wise and sensitive and has worked with disconnected young people. He takes the student into his home for dinner, discusses many aspects of life with him. The smile returns. Though no problems have been solved and no workplace visited, a soul has been listened to, nurtured, guided. This is a flourishing match" (PITARD, 2017, §19). [19]

Finding suitable mentors for these students filled me with as much joy as if I had been able to nurture them myself. I witnessed their distress in many ways and was disturbed by it. Young mothers who had left small children in Timor putting their heads down in the afternoon and falling asleep in class; nuns and priests missing the rituals and the support of belonging to a close knit religious community; principals of training colleges stressing over leaving their students in the hands of those less qualified; being confronted with learning in a language for which there were no equivalent words in Tetun, words such as learning theories, behaviourism, constructivism, cognitivism, evidence based research, to name a few. Some of the students knew little English and could not understand much of what I was saying. They told me in their interviews that Google translate was their most helpful tool. Daily encounters confused them—who to greet and who not to greet (people in their apartments did not return greetings), too many brands to choose from in the supermarket (there was rarely choice in Timor), what to do in an emergency (there were no emergency services in Timor), what to do when asked for a donation by a stranger. I often felt like I was failing them and I ran the risk of becoming overwhelmed. Reaching out to them through understanding their individual needs and matching them with suitable mentors proved supportive not only for them, but also for me. I deflected, for a time, a growing sense of vulnerability in myself. Would I have been wiser to sit still and listen to what was stirring inside me? The students and I were actually floundering together and I could not yet recognise this. [20]

7. Negotiating Their Welfare and Mine—A Crisis of Management

It was the beginning of September, and the winter had been bitterly cold. I had been teaching the students for eight weeks, with four remaining. The students walked twenty minutes to the university every morning along the river, often carrying their computers, lunch and any books borrowed from the library. They wore the winter coats I had collected from friends and family prior to their arrival and, as they told me in their focus group, these coats weighed heavily upon their backs. They were used to light clothing. They never complained but they often commented on the cold and how different it was to Timor. When I asked about their weekends some of them told me it was too cold to go out. I came to understand how long the weekends must seem to them so I organised some Sunday outings either into the city or to see Australian animals on the outskirts of Melbourne. My week then consisted of three days teaching, one day of preparation, two days off work and one day taking the students on an outing. Five days involved with university activities and two days to run my home and spend time with my family. As a chronic fatigue syndrome sufferer this schedule was more than I was used to.

"The alarm reverberates in my head as I realise it's Monday morning. My body feels like lead. I close my eyes knowing I risk falling back into deep unconscious sleep but a voice inside my head reminds me of my obligation to my students. I slip my legs out from beneath the covers and will my body to elevate. As I stand, the room fades temporarily and I struggle to bring it back into focus. Slowly I shower, dress and head for my car. No time for breakfast. I'll drink my green tea when I reach the university. I follow my teaching plan for the day. I am with the students from 9.30am until 5pm. I answer their questions during the morning break and offer advice whilst sipping a cup of tea. I listen to their questions and offer advice during the first half of our lunch break. I excuse myself and eat something with my colleagues. Twenty minutes later I commence our afternoon session. I forget to drink water. I have a cup of jasmine tea during our afternoon break while chatting to some students who wish to discuss their assignments. At 5 pm I conclude our formal class but stay to listen to students who wish to ask me questions. I offer them advice. Catching a glimpse of the clock on the wall I quickly gather up my computer and coat and rush out the door to my car. I am due on the tennis court to play competition at 7pm. I arrive at the courts, rush into the change rooms and emerge with racquet in hand ready for a warm-up before commencement of play.

We are in the second set and I am serving. I look down the court at the person I am serving to. I stall. As the server I am required to maintain the score. I ask my partner if he knows the score. He tells me. I serve and return the ball automatically. I hit the ball long. I can't remember which side I have just served from so I ask my partner again to tell me the score. I move to the appropriate serving position and serve the ball. The return comes hurtling back to me and I swipe at the ball and miss it. I can't remember which side I have just served from and again ask my partner the score. My opponents get the giggles. I am disoriented. I look at my opponents giggling at my lack of concentration and they start to fade. The court comes up to meet me and I realise I am falling. I call for help. My partner reaches my side as I slip down and he softens my fall. Our opponents hurry to where I am lying. One is an intensive care unit (ICU) nurse and she grills me with questions. Her decision is definite. She is calling an ambulance. I recover enough to speak and state that there is no need to call an ambulance. I will be fine. I stand and the world fades again. I lie down on the court for reassurance. I feel frightened. I do not understand what is happening to me. After some discussion I agree to be driven to the emergency department of the nearest hospital and ask that my daughter be telephoned so she can meet us there. She works at the hospital during the day. Later I ask her to telephone my manager the following morning so she can inform the students I will not be in class for the rest of the week.

My blood pressure is 60 over 40. I am hooked up to monitoring equipment and spend the first night in ICU. Not because I am in a critical condition but because it is the only free bed in the hospital and my daughter receives benefit as an employee. By Thursday the specialists are satisfied my heart is not the problem and I am released. I feel exhausted and beyond thinking clearly. I spend the weekend in bed.

My manager phones me. She tells me she cancelled the classes for the Tuesday and Wednesday. The students were told to use the time to work on their assignments. I assure my manager I will be ready to resume the following Monday.

A former colleague who is a close friend comes to visit me. She has witnessed my worst times with chronic fatigue and is concerned for me. She offers to prepare a day of teaching if I tell her what I want her to cover. She used to be my Head of Department so I know her strength is leadership. She offers to collect me on Monday morning to drive me to uni and to run the sessions for me while I co-ordinate from the sidelines. She will not be remunerated; she will not be covered by insurance. I gratefully accept her offer" (PITARD, 2016b, p.108). [21]

This incident alarmed me. My blood pressure of 60/40 and symptoms resembling a potential stroke required 24-hour monitoring. Spending the night in ICU added to my fright even though I knew I didn't qualify as an ICU patient. Seeing those around me fighting for their lives throughout the night humbled me beyond even the events on the tennis court. My daughter was adamant that I needed to do less, not more, for my students. As I stared out of the hospital window, I realised I had considered the welfare of my students more important than that of myself or my family. The mantle of responsibility had metamorphosed into a dangerous selflessness. In my dream world I walked in their shoes and experienced their loneliness for their own world—their children, their families, their wise elders leading community ceremonies which would restore their sense of belonging. I wanted to fill the void, to relieve their pain, but this was not part of my duty to them. I had trespassed on their emotions, and, in so-doing, had over-reached my responsibility to them. My physical stress alerted me to how my commitment to the students' wellbeing was impacting on my own health and in turn impacting on the students. At this moment I had a profound epiphany of understanding in the form of another striking memory of myself as a 24-year-old.

It is 5pm on Friday 25 April, 1975 and I am alone in the Melbourne office of the Parliamentary Leader of the Federal Opposition. The rest of our staff are in Canberra where Federal Parliament sits. Our only overseas communication is via telex machine, which prints out messages typed in other countries. As Saigon is falling, the telex machine is streaming out requests for urgent evacuation of South Vietnamese who have assisted Australian soldiers and our Embassy during our involvement in their civil war. Many have already been shipped or flown to safety but time is running out to save them all. Alone and despairing as I read these emotional appeals for assistance, I phone our Canberra Office and am told it is already too late for these people. Over the weekend, I view distressing television footage of desperate Vietnamese people clinging to the feet of the last Australian helicopter as it lifts off the roof of the embassy in Saigon

Vignette: Understanding an emotional response, based on a previous unresolved experience [22]

The memory of feeling helpless in the face of trauma provided me with insight into my willingness to prioritise the welfare of the Timorese students ahead of myself. I recognised this as an opportunity for me to right the wrong. My need to make amends so openly demonstrated aligns with the concept of counter transference, described by HAYES, GELSO and HUMMEL (2011) as internal and external reactions, where unresolved conflicts are the origin and some

characteristic of the trigger for personal vulnerabilities. Turning the lens back on myself on this day supported me not only in understanding my trespass on my students' emotions, but also in forgiving myself. [23]

This incident also worried the students. Hospitals in Timor are reserved for the very ill and consequently they deemed me as being in that category. They were distressed for me and inherently understood my attention to their needs had been too much for me physically. With just three weeks left we developed a new pattern of working together. They became more independent as they turned to each other to discuss their learning before bringing to me the results of their group work. They led class discussions instead of waiting for me to stand and lead from the front of the room. I encouraged them in their endeavours and congratulated them on their transition to student centred learning. They walked tall. [24]

8. Self-Determination to Self-Acknowledgement

My physical stress alerted me to the absolute commitment I had made to these students. I had been unwilling to compromise their wellbeing so instead chose to compromise my own. A familiar lesson for me. Inadvertently, this incident of my physical weakness propelled the students to take the final step in embracing self-determination. In my mind, my obligation to these students encompassed more than the teaching of a post-graduate qualification. I strove to be their link between the solid ground of their previous life experience and the new emotions experienced through the critical reflection I was endeavouring to foster in them. They had each other as sounding boards but they also needed direction and feedback. I believe every student experienced transformational learning, some to a greater extent than others. In their final interviews, one student described his learning as like a light bulb going on in his head which had caused him to reflect on the future direction of his life; another lamented that he was in his forties and nobody had previously explained that he could determine his own learning. He was used to a didactic method of teaching. Another described the pure joy of understanding and using the concept of critical analysis. These emotions were very strongly expressed. [25]

On our last day together in Melbourne, I conducted our session in a large meeting room on the fourth floor of the library building with expansive 360-degree views over Melbourne. Later that day we would attend a farewell afternoon tea and the next day the students would return to Timor. It was an extremely important day as the students acknowledged their achievement over the previous twelve weeks. We discussed how they felt about what they had learnt and their comments were positive but I did not recognise their perception of the depth of their learning. Spontaneously I suggested we undertake an exercise where each student would be invited to walk to the whiteboard at the front of the room and write down something they had learned which was of value to them.

"No-one moves. They stare ahead at the two whiteboards, frightened to look at me. I have time. I can wait. I have learnt patience over the last twelve weeks.

There is a stir. Silently a student walks to the board, picks up the whiteboard marker and writes. Another student moves towards the board and adds another piece of knowledge. I have provided three whiteboard markers and soon all three markers are constantly in action. I notice that something written by one student will inspire another student to add to it. As the board fills up smiles are beginning to appear on faces. The second whiteboard begins to fill. Fifteen minutes later the two whiteboards have no white space left on them. They are covered in writing.

I ask 'Do you acknowledge how much you now know?'

The silence in the room is broken by a student clapping. Others join in and soon there is a chorus of clapping as they celebrate their achievement. Smiles are broad. They are happy" (PITARD, 2016b, p.110). [26]

It was extremely important that these students acknowledge the learning they had achieved. Their sacrifice in leaving their homes and families, coming to a different culture, enduring the bitter cold winter of Melbourne and studying hard deserved to be rewarded. That reward needed to come from within themselves, not from me. Acknowledging this achievement at a deeper level as they did on that morning would mean they would carry this achievement with them forever. Their achievements also signalled my ability to assist people to change their lives. Their struggle inspired reflexivity and consequent improvements in my teaching practice. At times throughout the journey, I had doubted my capacity to overcome my fear of difference, of being different, and of being able to teach a group who is different. The "other" had become familiar. [27]

9. No Turning Back

Nine months after the students returned home, a colleague accompanied me to Timor to assist with assessment of the students' projects. We arrived in Dili on a Sunday evening, drenched with anticipation. I would be re-united with my students. Some of them would be travelling great distances to attend the presentations of their projects over the last twelve months. I knew from their project reports some would be proud and well prepared, others scrambling to put together their PowerPoint presentations in a professional manner—and perhaps regretting leaving this until the last minute. All had promised to attend for the three planned days of presentations and case study interviews to conclude my research but I wondered what last minute compelling work requirements or family events might prevent them from coming and I felt nervous about this. I believed the success of the scholarship program hinged on all students achieving the qualification. Some students had stayed in constant contact with me; some had remained mostly silent until I reminded them I was arriving for their presentations in eight weeks. Even then I didn't receive immediate responses from them. [28]

On the Monday morning a student collected us from our hotel to drive us to Dili Institute of Technology (DIT) for the student presentations. DIT honoured us with the use of the Boardroom, furnished with a large solid wooden oval table in old

European style (Portuguese) and twenty large comfortable office chairs on wheels. The walls of the room were white and the four double windows were closed and covered in sky blue curtains which remained permanently drawn against the oppressive heat. At the head of the table pushed against the wall stood two flags hanging in folds from their brass poles. One had the colours of Timor, black yellow and red, the colours of indigenous peoples, and the other a DIT flag in blue and white. A screen had been pulled down from the ceiling at the front of the room and a projector attached to a laptop computer was connected to a power source on the wall behind. At the back of the room on a podium stood a statue of the Virgin Mary with artificial flowers in a vase. Two wall-mounted cooling units ineffectually buzzed in the background.

"Her hands fumble as she inserts the USB into the laptop connected to the overhead projector. Her PowerPoint presentation glows from the white screen in the overly hot, darkened boardroom. Her lowered voice and hesitant English ensure she has the absolute attention of her audience. Her presentation is detailed and complex. Her explanation gains confidence with each passing slide. Her project is well executed and evaluated. Her audience applauds with enthusiasm. As we take a break before the next presentation commences, several of the older students approach me to declare their delight at the student's presentation. They do not believe a year ago she would have been capable of such a complex report so confidently delivered.

'She was so shy when she began this course'.

'She has never before produced a report like this'.

They marvel at her progress. I recognise in them not only their pride for her but pride for themselves. This achievement makes them feel proud of their collective accomplishment. I am bursting with joy. I want them to tell me more about how they feel. This is my reward for my work with them. They drift away to take a break. They have said enough. My reward must come from within myself. I did the best I could whilst feeling my way blindly through the cultural landscape of their minds, their lack of underpinning knowledge, their difficulty in studying in English and their emotional trauma in leaving behind family and friends. I feel vindicated in my belief that these students could reach Australian Qualification Framework Level 8 within the twelve month period of the GCVET [graduate certificate in VET]. I check my pride. It is not my achievement. It is theirs" (PITARD, 2016b, p.113). [29]

There were many presentations worthy of comment, but it is significant that these students wanted me to understand their joy that their fellow student had developed the ability and the confidence to make an outstanding presentation. It was a dawning realisation for all of us of the consequence of the learning that had been achieved over the previous twelve months. Rather than individual students taking pride in their own achievements, I was witnessing a collective understanding of what it meant for them as a group. Many had not known each other before coming to Melbourne and had not understood the infrastructure of their own VET system in Timor. Now they felt connected through their new knowledge; many held senior positions within these systems. This had been part of their learning, perhaps part of the hidden curriculum. They had achieved what had sometimes seemed impossible. My feeling of relief was palpable in me. I had

not fully realised I had been metaphorically "holding my breath" for twelve months, terrified that I would fail in this task put upon me by my university, and yet unsupported by it in many ways. [30]

10. An Enduring Relationship With Timor

Of my twelve graduates from VU, I am still in touch with one. He is in his early forties and is now deputy director of a training institution in Dili. Since his return to Timor in 2013, he has deeply influenced the growth of training in Timor. Below is an extract from my journal using the pseudonym Jose.

"Jose dressed with flair. He wore a gold chain on his wrist and interesting shoes. Initially Jose was an enigma to me. His broad smile across prominent teeth defined his friendliness but a reserve in his demeanour forewarned me that he was not convinced that I was cool and that this whole study thing wasn't going to be a repeat of what he had already conquered. He had lived in Australia for four months several years previously whilst undertaking a Diploma of Training and Assessment at Box Hill TAFE and I sensed this gave him the authority to be laid back about another study trip to Australia. He had completed a Degree in Engineering in Indonesia but his position as Project Manager of Training at his training centre in Dili allowed him to diversify from engineering to influence the selection of courses offered to students, thereby impacting the provision of skilled labour to build the economy in Timor. The students who came to the training centre where he worked were unemployed, displaced youth searching for a direction which would provide employment in a turbulent economy. I had visited the training centre on my first visit to Dili and understood that the centre offered youth a place to gather, to play basketball, to pass the time and to establish a sense of belonging to a community. The task of converting this youth contact into productive skill development was a huge undertaking and Jose indicated in every respect that he was dedicated to his role in Dili and that he did not want to waste his time in Australia.

Jose's intense intelligence saw him flit from excitement to frustration quite easily. In the first week of our classes he became animated and effusive as I explained the concept of critical analysis and he quickly understood how this could be applied in practice. I came to understand his occasional display of frustration was borne from having to wait for his classmates to catch up before we could move forward in our learning. He was a leader in learning but did not take a leadership role within the group. He was generous in contributing to the explanations of concepts and often translated what he was learning into Tetun so his classmates could keep apace. Rather than this emanating from leadership I think it was testament to his need to move the group on so he could learn more, as quickly as possible. His extroverted personality ensured he became a well-known figure around the university, especially amongst the Timorese community. His appointed mentor, the Manager of Hospitality and Tourism Training, demonstrated the on-the-job training facilities at the university in a state-of-the-art training restaurant, which was open to staff of the university and the public. Captivated by this idea, Jose planned to build a similar facility at his training centre in Dili. When I returned to Dili in 2013 to assess student projects, Jose's training restaurant and an accompanying conference centre were in the final

stages of completion. The difficulties which had to be overcome in building this facility were enormous, including having to run joined extension leads over 300 metres of muddy ground to a distant building to access electricity, providing a single source of power for those working on the building site" (PITARD, 2016b, pp.63-64). [31]

In the beginning when I asked students to provide me with a job description of their employment in Timor, they were unable to do so stating that they did not actually know what their job entailed. They simply turned up for work and did whatever they were asked to do. The idea that they should innovate in their work role seemed unfamiliar to them. Not long after returning to Timor from Australia, Jose made an appointment to see the Minister for Education in Timor to stress the importance of introducing critical thinking into the school curriculum. As a consequence, he was appointed by the Government to deliver management training to hundreds of department staff and to advise the Minister on the capability of those staff. His impact in helping to build the education infrastructure in Timor is well signposted. He has developed a state-of-the-art hospitality training facility with a professional kitchen and an indoor/outdoor restaurant which is open to the public. He has been instrumental in developing a ceramics centre to showcase the women and men from all outposts of Timor who follow this ancient Timorese tradition and his work with displaced youth is ongoing. Today his Institute's Facebook page proudly posts photos of student achievements in tourism and hospitality training. [32]

When I contacted Jose last year to seek his permission to nominate him for a university alumna award, he quite legitimately admitted he had often dreamed of receiving such an award. From over 160 applicants, many in high powered positions and some with Australian awards and titles, he was one of ten finalists. He became the inaugural winner of the Spirit of (the university) award for 2020, the first indigenous student, I believe, to be a finalist and eventual winner in these university awards. On receiving this news, Jose discussed with me his difficulty in feeling worthy of such an honour, especially as his award was highly celebrated in Timor. All twelve who completed the graduate certificate in VET have contributed in major ways to their young nation's development. All demonstrate the "Spirit of (the university)". [33]

From the commencement of my dealings with the Timorese students like Jose, my epistemological stance was that my identity as a teacher and the social world created through interacting with the students would impact on, and influence, each other. I expected that the cultural and language differences would impact on the student-teacher relationship. What I had not anticipated was the depth of the impact of a lack of cultural pre-understandings by both myself and the students when entering into a conversation with each other. Anthropology teaches us that a conversation between people of a similar culture will have inherent understood values whose interpretation will influence the understanding of the conversation. Drawing on the work of GEERTZ (1973), STEVENSON (2000) pointed to how the symbolic nature of culture keeps open the possibility to further interpretations, and stressed the need to distinguish between the intersubjective meanings produced by those we are investigating and the sense the researchers make of

these interpretations. He also drew on the work of HABERMAS (1990 [1983]) and his assertion there are three validity claims which constitute a background consensus of normal everyday language use in western society, based on truth, appropriateness and sincerity. According to STEVENSON, if we accept these validity claims then we should accept that:

"'in principle' our own perceptions and utterances have the same status as those who we are seeking to understand. We should, according to Habermas, open ourselves up to reciprocal forms of conversation without having previously decided who is going to learn from whom. This would entail giving up the perspective of the 'observer' for an equal partner in conversation" (2000, p.28). [34]

Equally, we should not assume in advance that we understand the background assumptions of those from another country given that any interpretation is inevitably influenced by the value judgements of the interpreter. The Timor students came from a culture where the teacher is at the centre of all learning. They openly told me this in their end of research focus group. I practice in a culture where student centred learning is the norm. As the foregoing account attests, our collective value judgements and assumptions required realignment before we could communicate at a level where the students understood they were not going to learn *from* me; they were going to learn *with* me, and that I also had much to learn from them. This realignment was risky business, as it was important for them not to lose faith in my ability as the facilitator of their learning. [35]

11. Conclusion

Reflecting on what my experience with the Timor students has taught me as a researcher, I can discern how I went through an initial phase of feeling extremely humbled and often shameful, until I inevitably gained the support I craved from them. They provided this despite their own floundering in a foreign language and culture, and in return their courage and perseverance inspired me. When I felt unsupported by my university, I gained emotional strength from the students themselves and from the journey we travelled together. Understanding their shock and confusion rendered my own shock and confusion less relevant. My vulnerability, over time, became juxtaposed with their position as the vulnerable ones. I was originally overwhelmed by their dependence on me but gradually drew solace from their strength, such as when they embraced responsibility for their own learning after my illness and hospitalisation. And then came their joy in realising achievement and pride in their learning and their new network of VET colleagues. This matched my own sense of achievement. The autoethnographic researcher framework in which I operated informed and promoted my understanding of these relationships with the unknown "other" as they were unfolding. Without the self-analysis and reflexivity of autoethnography, I am convinced the program would not have achieved its educational outcomes. My understanding enabled theirs, and vice versa, allowing us to cross the divide of cultural difference, to reach the shared place that we call humanity. For me, and I believe for them, there is no turning back. [36]

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