Chapter sixteen

Embracing Autoethnographic Anxiety
The Joyous Potential of Teaching and Advising Relationships

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Sandy: I ask Darren if he has time to chat. I’ve been trying to write a solo-authored chapter on “Teaching and Advising Autoethnography”; I’ve struggled with the solo part. “It doesn’t seem like I can do it justice without a writing partner,” I tell him. Teaching and advising feel too relational to write about them on my own, and I think Darren and I can narrate the nuances of this relationship, by writing through our relationship. Moreover, writing is difficult for me; I don’t model the process that I want to instill in students and advisees, and so letting someone in is daunting. I need to write with someone I trust, someone I know will meet me compassionately and honestly while in this vulnerable and nervous process; that’s Darren, without question.

Darren responds positively but expresses a concern: “I don’t have much experience writing autoethnography, so I might need some time to learn more about using it.” My advisor mode kicks in, where I remind him of his publication that uses autoethnographic narrative (Valenta, 2018), his heavily autoethnographic dissertation that he’s about to defend, and his narrative performance work (Valenta & Wilcoxen, 2018). “I’ve seen your work—it’s squarely within an autoethnographic framework. Even though you haven’t taken an autoethnography course, you’ve thoughtfully and meaningfully engaged autoethnography throughout your graduate career.” We both have experience with autoethnography, and being able to draw upon our relationship (student–teacher, advisee–advisor) feels important for a chapter like this. I hope he agrees.

Darren: Sandy’s invitation to work on this chapter is incredibly humbling, and the kind of proposition that I typically meet with reflexive self-deprecation. I tell her she’s right, though. Our student–teacher and eventually advisee–advisor relationship is unique because of the trust we’ve built together over the years.

I first met Sandy a few weeks after I moved to Carbondale, Illinois, in July 2016. I arranged to meet in her office on campus to pick up course materials for the fall. As an Oregon-native, I was wholly unprepared for the heat and humidity of a southern Illinois summer, and so I decided to walk the mile to campus from my house. The sun was angry that day. Wanting to make a good first impression, I had dressed up a bit in a Polo shirt and business casual khaki shorts. After swimming through the thick, clinging air on my way to the Communications Building, though, my efforts at impressing Sandy were foiled. Our meeting was the prototype of what our visits would be throughout my time at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, aside from all my sweating. Sandy was gracious, warm, and helpful. As our time together ended, I casually remarked that I’d walked to campus, and Sandy looked shocked. “But it’s so hot outside,” she said with a level of concern far greater than I would expect from someone I’d just met. “Please be careful on your way home.”

This level of care and concern has only grown as Sandy and I have gotten to know each other, which is why, when I found myself in need of a new advisor after mine retired, I turned to Sandy without hesitation. I knew the back half of my
Ph.D. program, complete with a preliminary exam, prospectus defense, and dissertation, would be a difficult stretch. I knew I needed someone I could trust, someone I could be vulnerable with, someone who could see me at my worst and still help me achieve my best.

When I shy away from Sandy’s suggestion that I join her on a writing project, she does what she has always done for me: accepts my vulnerability without judgment and then helps me see the possibilities that lie beyond.

“I’m in,” I tell her. “I’d love to help.”

Sandy: When Darren agrees, I feel a surge of hesitation. I want to make sure he knows what he’s getting into with me before we go further. “I don’t tend to write with other people,” I confess, “both because the thought of others reading my writing in process makes me very nervous, and because I think I have less-than-stellar work habits.” I tend to let people into my writing once it’s at the point where I’m looking for reviewers—not so much when the ideas are budding. “The prospect of letting you in this early in the project feels both intimidating and nerve-wracking, especially because I respect your writing.” Darren seems taken aback by me divulging my uncertainty. Perhaps he’s reconsidering wanting to be involved? He replies with a bit of a grin, “That’s funny because I feel the exact same way, even after you saw my dissertation in progress.” We’re both a little nervous, then. At least we’re nervous together.

There’s something else, though. “I place some pressure on myself as the ‘teacher’ and ‘advisor,’” I continue. “There’s a façade I suppose I need to live up to; what if you see what I’m really like? What if you see the flaws in my pedagogical performance?”

Thinking about writing this chapter with you brings the thought of others reading my writing in process. “It makes me very nervous, and because I think in this early in the project feels both intimidating and nerve-wracking, especially because I respect your writing.” Darren seems taken aback by me divulging my uncertainty. Perhaps he’s reconsidering wanting to be involved? He replies with a bit of a grin, “That’s funny because I feel the exact same way, even after you saw my dissertation in progress.”

Throughout the chapter, we offer narrative excerpts between us—between an advisee/student and his advisor/teacher, between a teacher/advisor and her student/advisee—that demonstrate particular practices of teaching and advising autoethnography. We struggled with the idea of separating the teaching and advising relationships; we use “teaching” to mean a classroom sense and “advising” to mean that curricular relationship one would find in, for example, an undergraduate independent research project or a thesis/dissertation project. However, the relationships that make these projects possible contain individual nuances specific to the relationship. In other words, the material experiences of “teaching” and “advising” (and of being “taught” and “advised”) contain specificities that are difficult to represent in language. We intend this chapter to engage the teaching and advising relationships synonymously, with the important recognition that they both converge and diverge in practice. For ease of language (i.e., to reduce wordiness), we collapse them under the term “pedagogical relationship.”

**EXPECTATIONS**

Teaching and advising relationships make possible many unique joys and challenges (not always easily distinguishable). These joys and challenges relate to changing roles as the relationship evolves, affective elements of teaching and advising autoethnographic projects, and navigating interpersonal dimensions of the relationship. In this chapter, we use our teaching and advising relationship to introduce the concept of “autoethnographic anxiety.” The concept of anxiety (and its common companion, depression) associated with autoethnography is not new. Devin Collins (2017) uses autoethnography to identify and deconstruct disruptions, or hurtful experiences that invited him to step into his anxiety, and provides a social and cultural account of mental illness. Barbara J. Jago’s (2002) beautiful and deeply personal story of depression as it intersects with academic life effectively demonstrates the power of evocative narrative. Sustained introspection, as chronicled in Jago’s piece, provides writers and readers the opportunities “to become more acutely aware of the ways in which we craft lived experience into meaningful and livable stories” (p. 756). Similarly, Arthur P. Bochner (1997) reveals the tensions experienced when the academic self and personal self confront one another in the midst of a tragic experience of death. Ronald J. Pelias (2000), in a less direct way, narrates a kind of academic melancholy in an artfully told second-person day-in-the-life academic tale. Inspired by this literature, we use our relationship as fertile ground to articulate elements of autoethnographic anxiety; the emergence of this multifaceted definition functions as an anchoring concept through which we examine our relationship as student–teacher/advisee–advisor.

**WHEN NARRATIVE LOOMS: A PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGE OF AUTHOR AND READER**

Darren: Lying on my back with my arms flopped above my head atop my pillow-top king-sized.
bed, I grimace at the ceiling as wave after wave of anxiety pulses through my body. I just submitted a chapter of my dissertation to my advisor, a large, 80-page section I wrote over a grueling month of introspection that has left me emotionally raw. I did not initially mean to write about my own dealings with anxiety; I was supposed to be analyzing other people’s stand-up comedy performances about their anxiety, but, somewhere along the way, it only felt natural to include reflections on my own. The result is a chapter full of more personal details than I have ever disclosed to any one person. For example, I wrote candidly about my endless chase for external validation and the potential relief of disregarding the opinions of others:

My attempts thus far in my life to fill the yawning chasm of self-doubt in my chest usually consist of chasing external achievement and validation. The endless pursuit of the approval of an external audience continually proves fruitless. Trying to pour praise into a self-love-shaped hole is like desperately trying to fill a leaky bucket with water; it will never provide a permanent solution. For a time, sure, the bucket holds the water, but it still ends up empty all the same. . . . The mere thought of freeing myself from the constraints of others’ opinions of me fills me with a sense of elation akin to what I imagine drinking anti-gravity potion would be like: my internal organs feel as if they’ve begun to float up towards the top of my rib cage as I start my inevitable lift-off from the ground. (Valenta, 2020, pp. 176–177)

I relinquish the 80-page section to Sandy for her perusal. To be clear, if I trust anyone with the intimate details of my inner dealings with anxiety, it is Sandy, but the thought of divulging these things to anyone feels truly terrifying. “What if she thinks of me differently?” I panic. “What if she now sees through my carefully crafted façade of confidence and competence and no longer respects me?” The anxiety crushes me, constricting my ribcage like a rusty metal vice in a high school metal shop. Nausea sets in, complementing my racing thoughts and desperate attempts to self-soothe with stammering soliloquies delivered to an empty house. The thought of sharing my anxiety with another person and risking their judgment confines me to that supine position for nearly an hour before I can find my feet again. Months later, when recounting this episode to my counselor, she remarks, “It sounds like that was really traumatic.” It was, but I am still unraveling why.

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Autoethnographic anxiety is the worry that writing about yourself will reveal personal details that alter your circumstances, damage your relationships, or leave you otherwise changed for the worse.

Autoethnographers may worry about losing the respect of others, or being seen differently by those around them (and those meeting them on the page), or regretting the words they have committed to, or inadvertently revealing too much with unpredictable consequences. Readers of autoethnography have a responsibility to read with grace, to respond and critique with compassion, and to recognize the willing vulnerability of a writer. Similarly, when advising autoethnographic projects, an advisor must understand that their responsibility involves embracing the “heart work” (Dannels, 2015, p. 2) necessary to acknowledge the trust, openness, and anxiety of their advisee. Describing this labor as “heart work” points to the highly affective component of pedagogy. Doing the heart work of teaching and advising includes self-reflection, a willingness to be changed by the relationship, and a commitment to humility, while not losing sight of their role as a guide.

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SANDY: One thing I love about getting to be Darren’s advisor is that it’s easy. I’ve been working with him on his dissertation project, in which he builds and then uses a performance criticism framework for analyzing performances of stand-up comedy that work against the stigma of mental illness. This beautiful project is the culmination of more than four years of his engagement with mental illness, disability studies, performance, and pedagogy. In those four years, I’ve had the pleasure of encountering his crisp, smooth, and engaging writing; the edits are few and far between. Moreover, his writing moves; it does something; it changes a reader by both the thoughts and reflections it inspires, as well as the way it allows the reader to place themselves in the writing. Once his writing leaves me and goes to his committee, I always feel anxious, thinking I must have missed something because I didn’t find much to critique. My inadequacies as an advisor float to the surface as I pour through
the document once again, looking for something, anything, to make it seem like I’m performing the good advisor. And at the same time, Darren should know how good of a writer and scholar he is; I shouldn’t make things up just to fulfill some kind of inarticulable norm of what constitutes an effective advisor. But time and again, his committee members comment upon how they enjoy and are compelled by his writing. And so, when his first draft of Chapter Five—that 80-page chapter—shows up in my inbox, I look forward to the time it will take to read this, because I know it will be good. This is the chapter where, after having developed his performance criticism framework, he carefully unpacks and richly describes four stand-up comedy performances that intimately and humorously—though sometimes tragically humorous—confront stigma associated with depression and anxiety.

The email arrives both with his chapter, and a bit of the material is there—all 80 pages. And I’m proud of what I’ve come up with. But I just need a little time away from the chapter before I can polish it. I know you’ll understand, but I still feel immensely guilty.

Sensing that he’s probably also sparked some concern from me, he signs off, “Know that I will be just fine.”

The analytical and evaluative frame with which I usually lead when responding to an advisee’s work gives way to a more caring and emotional frame. Darren is right—I am concerned about him and his well-being, and I have to ask myself how I might best respond in this moment to first (and primarily) preserve his positive sense of self and second (and secondarily) to comment upon his chapter. To navigate this, I draw upon the relational context that we’ve built over the years. Autoethnography involves “painful self-reflection” (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010, p. 3). Engaging in research topics that one has such a personal connection to—such as anxiety and depression—runs the risk of triggering adverse feelings in the autoethnographer. I also ask myself if I, as his teacher and advisor, adequately prepared him to “do the hard work of feeling the pain and learning through the process of writing” (p. 9). I sense that I haven’t, and this is my responsibility. My anxieties about being an effective advisor have seemingly been fulfilled; this cannot be about me, though. As I open the attachment, print, and ready myself to read, the pedagogical relationship we have built comes to the fore as I prepare to respond so that we both will work toward a high-quality dissertation and, more importantly, that he feels cared for and acknowledged. I value this relationship (as I value my relationships with all of my advisees), and I value this relationship (the one I have with Darren); I strive to read with compassion. I want to ask him if he thinks he can and should continue along this vein of writing. I want to ask him if he is seeing a therapist or counselor. I want to ask him to consider if this story needs to be told now, not because it’s not a good story, but because of the implications on his well-being. Instead, I remind him of how important it is to take care of himself in this dissertation process, particularly when the process is so raw and personal. I assure him that he is doing excellent work. Yet, I don’t think I realize the gravity of what he’s been through.

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Autoethnographic anxiety is the apprehension involved in responding to the deeply personal writing of another.

In that response, a reader must strive to balance reading for critique and reading for connection, reading for feedback and reading for feeling. The pedagogical relationship provides relational cues to know how to respond in the first instance. An advisor should contextualize comments meant to push the advisee autoethnographer—draw upon the literature in the field, hone the craft of the
writing, acknowledge delicate aspects, and lead with respect for self and story. Above all, be available for conversation and check-in.

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The processes of creating, reading, and evaluating autoethnography all involve tensions and vulnerabilities. Those tensions and vulnerabilities are contextualized in a variety of relationships. Whether solo-authored or co-authored, autoethnography gives rise to a number of relationships, including the interpersonal relationships of the author (particularly those explicitly written into the text); that of the author and the socio-cultural systems within which the author is situated; the relationship of the author with a past, present, and future self; and the relationship of an author and reader. Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (1995) situate personal narrative as always existing within the context of a relationship. In other words, personal narrative is, in this sense, never isolated to one individual but instead is comprised of relational partners. In writing autoethnography, then, the writer must attend to the variety of relationships constructed in the process of writing, and represented in the writing itself.

Autoethnographic authorship, similarly, takes on many forms and faces. How does Sandy author part of the story Darren tells himself about his dissertation chapter and, in particular, the presence of the personal in his writing? How does Darren’s “solo” writing, and Sandy’s subsequent reading, co-author the intersubjective narrative of their relationship, in the context of pedagogical assumptions about teacher–student/advisor–advisee? Autoethnographic authorship introduces potential anxieties about the self that one makes public through the writing (Wall, 2008). What does Darren conceal and reveal about himself in his dissertation chapter? What does Sandy conceal and reveal about herself in her response? By authoring our relationship in these book chapter pages, what do we reveal and conceal about ourselves in response? By authoring our relationship in these book chapter pages, what do we reveal and conceal about ourselves in response?

Beyond the recognition that experiences are necessarily intersubjective, co-authored autoethnographies engage multiple authorial voices, providing another relational aspect to examine. For example, in developing narrative co-construction, Bochner and Ellis (1995) respond to a need for “research to include personal narratives that display how people participate together in the process of making sense of their local circumstances” (p. 201). The process “wrestles with important issues of reflexivity, intersubjectivity, emotional expression, and joint action” (p. 202). In community autoethnography, autoethnographers write together with “community-building as a fundamental research goal” (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009, p. 58). The process is a “relationship-making activity” in which authors also gain “in-depth and intimate understandings” (p. 59) of a topic about which they all dialogically narrate their experiences. Autoethnography allows examination of the co-authoredness of our lives. In “intimate collaborative scholarly praxis,” Jonathan Wyatt, Ken Gale, Larry Russell, Ronald J. Pelias, and Tami Spry (2011) exchanged email dialogue over the span of a year. The writing process, in this experiment, became a moment for partners to bear witness to the rawness of the “me” in the “we.” In this article, Spry suggests that here is where intimacy is born, “by writing into risk, risking that sometimes we won’t be seen by one another, or seen in the way we desire, or that we will not meet one another’s eyes in those moments of vulnerability” (p. 257).

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Autoethnographic anxiety is the vulnerability felt when submitting writing about your life, culture, and experience for evaluation.

Evaluating autoethnographies and personal narratives written by students and advisees is a delicate endeavor. Students and advisees risk critique not only on a methodological level (as being novices in method) but also on a personal level, in a variety of senses. For example, writing autoethnography may trigger an author into re-living and re-engaging in harmful behaviors (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010). Authors writing within a more personal narrative genre risk their work—and their experiences—as being dismissed as simply therapeutic (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2017). Concretizing one’s ideas and feelings by putting them on the page risks freezing oneself in time, with no ability to control the interpretive processes and
conclusions of readers (Ellis, 1999). Critique—from anyone—can feel like erasure of personhood. Both advisors and advisees engage in heart work when allowing a sense of personhood to be put on display in autoethnography. And both must proceed from the heart in the process of evaluation.

ANXIETY LIVED, AUTOETHNOGRAPHICALLY

Darren: Most of my time as a doctoral student has been about dissecting and defining my own anxiety. I have devoted countless hours to reading, writing, and thinking about anxiety as a phenomenon, social/cultural influence, and personal flaw. In many ways, though, this has been a life-long project. Lots of folks have tried to explain the origins and experiences of anxiety. A common definitional tactic is to compare anxiety and fear. For example, Joseph LeDoux (2015) views fear as the result of “[a]n immediately present stimulus that is itself dangerous, or that is a reliable indicator that danger is likely to soon follow,” and anxiety as “involv[ing] worry about something that is not present and may never occur” (p.11). Similarly, in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) contrasts fear and anxiety to delineate the two: “Fear is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas anxiety is the anticipation of future threat” (p. 189, original emphasis). The focus, then, rests on the stimulus to which the individual reacts, whether it is clear and present or amorphous and anticipated. One of my greatest anxieties falls into this category, a faint yet persistent poke from a far-off but seemingly plausible unlikelihood. Perfectly enough, the worry that Ashton, my wife, will grow tired of my bristling and brooding and leave me stems from another source of anxiety:

I react very poorly to change. Even the smallest change in a routine or plan will send me spiraling into a brooding melancholy. . . . This type of pouting happens constantly, but I often feel powerless to stop it. Whether it’s a sudden change in the order Ashton and I tackle our errands or Ashton and I leaving a little late to catch a movie, my reaction is the same: a complete angry shut down that lasts for a day or two. These episodes often lead to fights between Ashton and me in which I start feeling righteously indignant and end feeling sheepishly apologetic. . . . I end up apologizing for being so ridiculous, and, because she’s infinitely understanding, Ashton accepts. But it’s become more frequent lately for her to remind me that we’ve repeated this cycle countless times in our relationship. I now feel this creeping dread that maybe she’ll grow tired of enduring this merry-go-round and that she’ll ask the operator, me, to let her get off. I’m afraid I won’t be able to stop these anxiety-fueled spirals and that I won’t be able to stop her from leaving. Despite this and the endless pep-talks I give myself when I start to feel that intoxicating cocktail of anxiety and anger, it always slips out of my control. I always wake up after feeling that white-hot fire in my belly, disappointed in my failure. And I always wonder how many chances I have left to get it right.

(Valenta, 2020, pp. 194–196)

There are times, though, when the threat that triggers anxiety is really nothing at all, merely the faint whiff of a remote possibility. This kind of anxiety isn’t even an amorphous blob; there is, in fact, no blob at all, but the creeping dread remains. With anxiety, the perceived threat might be difficult to identify because, as Martin Heidegger (1962) explains, “that which threatens cannot bring itself close from a definite direction within what is close by; it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles breath, and yet it is nowhere” (p. 231). I feel this omnipotent anxiety frequently, especially when it comes to making important decisions:

For my entire adult life, I’ve identified my intellect as the tool that separates me from others. My abilities to problem solve and think creatively have garnered me accolades, success, and personal fulfillment. Because of this, I rely on the full capacity of my decision-making processing capabilities at every turn. I truly believe that, no matter the situation, I can solve the issue if I can just think through it the right way. . . . I can’t keep myself from indulging this kind of compulsive thinking and it often feels like it’s tearing me apart from the inside. In these moments, I feel locked in a battle between my rational and anxiety selves. Each solid argument presented by the former is quickly knocked away by the what ifs of the latter. Around and around the argument goes until I feel like I’m floating above my body, watching this weak
animal devolve into an ineffectual babbling worrier. I hate myself in these moments because I’ve become something I no longer recognize. (Valenta, 2020, pp. 152–153)

I could certainly identify the root of the anxiety above as the aversion to making a wrong decision, but the worry is larger than that. I’m often anxious to make any wrong decision, which results in spirals of second-guessing. To invoke Heidegger, the decision I dread does not bring itself close from a definite direction; I’m merely worrying about the process of failing in my decision-making. Furthermore, while I may not be currently considering a specific path of action, I nonetheless remain panic stricken, feeling that a looming choice is so close it stifles me while remaining a blurry threat at the edge of my vision. Despite anxiety’s nebulous nature, it can level anyone with relative ease.

The kind of anxiety of interest to us in this chapter, though, is more than an automatic physiological response; we are concerned more with the conscious feelings of anxiety, particularly as written autoethnographically, or even brought on by the processes of autoethnographic writing. In order to differentiate between automatic responses and conscious feelings, LeDoux (2015) defines consciousness as “a self-narrative built from bits and pieces of information we have direct conscious access to (perceptions and memories) and also from the observable or ‘monitorable’ consequences of nonconscious processes” (p. viii). Conscious feelings of anxiety, therefore, are “cognitive or psychological constructions” built to allow people to explain their emotional, psychological, and physiological states (p. viii). This gap between automatic responses and conscious feelings means that anxious thoughts are not naturally occurring, a fact that cognitive behavioral therpaists leverage to help those who experience debilitating levels of anxiety. In the cognitive behavioral model, anxious feelings stem from an avalanche of cascading thoughts (Burns, 2008, p. 12). Simply put, anxiety is a distorted narrative comprised of skewed or falsified evidence from an individual’s environment. The individual becomes used to automatically spinning this narrative when presented with certain stimuli and anxiety begins to look like the only natural response.

Autoethnographic writing, by its very nature, offers individuals dealing with conscious feelings of anxiety an opportunity to intervene in those automatic avalanches and cascades with deep reflection and self-examination. Autoethnography is intended as “cultural analysis through personal narrative,” the development of a self-narrative that is then placed in a larger context to make a greater point or revelation (Boyorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 17). As Tony E. Adams (2011) puts it, autoethnography allows me to “distance myself from [my] experiences in an attempt to discern and analyze patterns” (p.159). With this pattern recognition in relation to a broader context, I have the opportunity to challenge the distorted narratives created by my anxiety and reach out to those I trust for help to more accurately assess my place in the world. This is the importance, for me, of working through my autoethnographic anxiety: without turning my innermost thoughts over to Sandy, a deeply trusted other, I might have remained frozen in my own distorted perception.

A variety of factors led to my firm but distorted belief that I should not write honestly about myself and share with others. I am a fairly private person with a chronic aversion to asking for help or sympathy, a disposition drawn largely from my family’s tendency to handle stress quietly and internally. I also carry the weight of the stigma assigned to mental disorders of any kind and the internal shame that discourages me from sharing my experience. These influences, among a myriad of others, have dissuaded me, over the majority of my life, from writing about my thoughts and feelings, and conditioned me to develop a penchant for emotional self-flagellation if I breach this solemn code of silence. Anxiety, the kind that relegates me to my bed to stare blankly at the ceiling, is my self-inflicted price. The object of my worry is nowhere and nothing, perhaps a vague threat of judgment or ridicule, but it’s not about the specifics. The act of worrying is my pittance for working through my autoethnographic anxiety. So, when I submitted my dissertation chapter to Sandy, rife with confessions about my anxiety and its various manifestations in my life, it only seemed natural to punish myself.

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Autoethnographic anxiety is the result of the compulsion to narrate your own experience in a way that will prove compelling to those who might read it.

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Sandy: When Darren identifies his narratives as “distorted,” when he says he experiences dread, self-hatred, and panic, I believe him. I know that he feels things deeply, struggles intimately with self-doubt and thoughts that (his) writing doesn’t matter. He feels pressure to perform to sometimes impossible standards. When I see this happening, I’ve learned that it’s important to be compassionate and reassuring, to acknowledge and affirm, to gently wait for what I hope may be the right moment to reframe. Most of the time—maybe all of the time—he gets there without me.

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Autoethnographic anxiety is a vulnerable experiment in relationality. It is the generative space of reflexivity necessary for the kinds of relationship-building that autoethnography calls for and allows. It is the generative space of openness to the other and the self, openness to being changed by the pedagogical other, openness to share self, culture, and experience despite the inclination to remain silent.

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Sandy: Imposter syndrome’s link to anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and low self-esteem, among other indicators, is well documented in countless fields and among countless populations. I encounter one article on my Facebook feed that feels particularly relatable; it details the imposter syndrome that graduate advisors sometimes experience. One line feels so distinctly familiar: “a persistent worry that you don’t know enough to advise graduate students competently and that your perceived lack of knowledge will somehow disadvantage them” (Thompson, 2019). I experience this often when I can’t seem to find anything to correct in an advisee’s writing, or when I’m not well-versed in recent literature that is necessary for a lit review, or when committee members ask questions during defenses and I just hope that my advisees answer adequately because I don’t know the answer. Or when I realize how far removed I am from the job search process, or when I have trouble understanding how to help a minority advisee navigate academia.

I don’t tag anyone in particular on Facebook, and I have no way of knowing who will read my article repost. On some level, I simply want to acknowledge this particular manifestation of imposter syndrome, the kind that impacts the confidence of a graduate advisor. On another, more personal level, I mean this as an apology of sorts to past, present, and future advisees. But I would never mark that explicitly; my students have enough to worry about without also wondering if their advisor is capable of seeing them through to (and after) graduation, with dignity and while maintaining their humanity. They don’t need the emotional labor of having to console or assure me. But they still do.

JOYOUS SHIFTS FROM VULNERABLE MESSAGES

Message from Darren: Good morning, Sandy! I noticed that you posted the Chronicle article about imposter syndrome as an advisor on Facebook. I know I can’t dispel any of those feelings, but I want to let you know that I’ve enjoyed having you as my advisor. You’ve been the perfect combination of support and inspiration. You’ve let me mold my own project while providing helpful advice. And you’ve been honest about what you don’t feel comfortable with content-wise and when you don’t have the answers. That combination of humility and expertise is rare, I’ve found. And it’s what makes you a wonderful advisor. I know I lean on you a lot with questions. That’s a symptom of my anxiety; sometimes I overcommunicate to make myself feel better. But just know I appreciate you and all you do for me and the department.

Sandy: You know it’s hot inside when your eyes are sweating.

Darren: It’s that southern Illinois humidity!

Sandy: Darren, your message is so thoughtful and kind. I sincerely appreciate it. It’s occurring to me right now that the relationship is just that, a relationship, and the imposter syndrome we both feel is resisted by that relationship. You’re the best.

Darren: Absolutely. The relationships and connections to others who feel similarly is what makes the difference. Without those, I’m not sure where I’d be!

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Sandy: There is joyous potential in autoethnographic anxiety within the context of the pedagogical relationship, in that we get to live in the midst of how the relationship shifts. We entered this relationship because I taught one of the courses you were required to take, and oversaw your teaching.

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Eventually, you asked if I would be your advisor. What started out as a teacher–student relationship shifted into an advisor–advisee relationship. A primary component of this shift was the personal place that autoethnography welcomed us into. Your willingness to share your narratives of anxiety on the stage with a larger audience through your performance work (Valenta & Wilcoxen, 2018), and with me specifically on the pages you wrote in your papers and eventual dissertation, included a willingness to not just tell me about your anxiety, but to actively live in autoethnographic anxiety. This is some of what makes autoethnography so powerful, particularly when we allow ourselves and others to embrace the anxiety that accompanies it; we get to live with one another in spaces where we might most clearly and authenticly witness our humanity. You opened yourself to entering into those spaces of past anxiety, and brought them to the present, at a personal cost. So at the same time, entering into autoethnographic anxiety isn’t something that should be taken lightly. Through this process, you offered me the beautiful opportunity to sit in those spaces with you, and to create my own spaces of autoethnographic anxiety, as I grappled with providing meaningful and compassionate responses. What this makes possible is another shift, a shift towards friendship, which is a vehicle for the active living. On a more personal level, these relational shifts, captured largely in emails and texts and the pages of this chapter, gives me such a sense of gratitude and joy for how our friendship will grow.

**Darren:** It’s not often that I look at my anxiety, or really any anxiety, as an opportunity. Certainly, it isn’t in many cases. But evolutionarily, anxiety serves an important purpose: it motivates us to change and to adapt, to accomplish tasks, and take care of ourselves and those around us. In that way, I think autoethnographic anxiety matches that purpose. It can be scary to bare your soul on the page and then give it to someone else, especially if that someone is at least partly responsible for dubbing you worthy of a Ph.D. or granting you access to the annals of academia. Embracing that anxiety, though, has pushed me to reflect on parts of myself I never otherwise would have and in ways I never imagined. I’m a better writer now and more in tune with myself because you encouraged me to weave my own experience in with my attempts at more distanced analysis. You also took the time to read and thoughtfully respond to that experience, to care for and empathize with me, and to encourage me to do the same with myself. I feel like you know me much better than a lot of folks, and, whether you feel similarly or not, I feel like my writing and your advising of my dissertation has made us closer. Autoethnographic anxiety created that opportunity. Without the discomfort from stretching oneself beyond what is normal or expected, growth, change, and exchange might not be possible.

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Autoethnographic anxiety is a deeply personal and potentially generative state-of-being that both informs and draws upon trusting pedagogical relationships. Working through, in, and with autoethnographic anxiety requires a long-term commitment that allows relational partners to enter into vulnerability vulnerably.

**NOTES**

1. For more about the mental health crisis among graduate students, see Gray and Drew (2012), Flaherty (2018), Wedemeyer-Strombel (2020), and Wong (2018).

2. A sampling of the fields tackling imposter syndrome, and the populations studied therein, include management academia (Bothello and Roulet, 2019); library studies (Lacey and Parlette-Stewart, 2017); medicine and physician studies (LaDonna, Ginsburg, & Watling, 2018); minority students (Bauer-Wolf, 2017); millennials (McAlsum, 2016); undergraduate students (Ambrose, Gomez, and Tran, 2019); women faculty members (Laux, 2018); and pre-service TESOL teachers (daQuilanto, 2015), among others.

Autoethnographic work addressing imposter syndrome includes Ahn and Delesclefs (2020), Luscombe (2015), and Wilkinson (2020), among others.

**REFERENCES**


