

A STRUGGLING LEARNER: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The author offers an autoethnographic essay describing a struggling day's life of hers as a mother of two children, as a TA training student workers to provide technical support and services in a media office, and coordinating and supervising three computer labs in the whole school, as a graduate student, as a study partner, as an advisee pursuing her doctoral degree, and as a wife. Her multiple identities in American academic discourse are constructed through her autoethnographic narratives in a second person voice.

What does a day's life look like for an international doctoral student in the U.S. academic discourse? How is her TA work evaluated? Does she deserve a work load limit? Is she supposed to be given proper feedback on time as an advisee? What counts as critical L2 literacy in a critical literacy and pedagogy class? How can she properly address her toddler daughter's invisibility/marginalization in her daycare center? What role does autoethnography play in her identity construction?

Narrative

You wake up by your son's alarm clock at 7:10 a.m. You realize that if you don't get up on time to prepare breakfast for him he will be late for his school bus. Then you will have to drive him all the way to his school, which will definitely add more work for you and you might be late for your work. While you are getting up, your 21-month-old daughter is crying for nursing. For some lucky time, you can just go ahead to the kitchen and finish what you need to do there before she wakes up and needs your caring and attention. But on other occasions, you have to quickly turn on the stove and start warming up the soup and then quickly go back to your crying baby to help her peed and dress. Then you take her to the bathroom, wash her face and help her brush her teeth. After your son is out for his school bus, you can sit down to feed your daughter spoonful by spoonful with whatever you prepare for her as breakfast while you can find spots available for you to put something in your own mouth as your breakfast. You help your daughter put on her overcoat, grab her lunchbox and check whether her mittens, hat, snow pants and the daily parent-teacher interaction sheet are all in her bag. You hold her in your right arm and take other stuff in your left hand dashing to the village parking lot. You drive your daughter to her daycare center. You will be lucky if there is no traffic jam on the way. There at the daycare center, you put her lunch box in her cubby and help her take off her overcoat. She will look at you and look at the teachers and then turn back to you, wanting you to hold her and take her back home. You feel kind of embarrassed because it has been a while since she stops crying at drop-off time and now she is crying again when seeing you leave. You try your great effort to calm her down by telling her in your native language that you will come to get her very quickly though you are telling her

lies because you don't do that until her pick-up time at 4:15 p.m. every weekday. Feeling puzzled by what you said to your toddler, one of the teachers might come over to you to take your baby and let you get the chance to leave the daycare center quickly. You know that your toddler will stop crying shortly after you leave, which gives you some comfort. Otherwise you will start your day from a moody moment in the early morning.

After you drive back home and park legally in the village, you put on your heavy backpack, grab something for your lunch and dash to take a PVRTA bus to your school at the bus stop close to your village. You start your teaching assistantship job by checking the reservation folder and email reservations. Then you will check voiced message reservations. While you are writing down chronically on a small piece of paper what you need to do during your shift on that day as reminders, the telephone rings. You pick it up, and it's about a new reservation. You write down the request, feeling quite sure you don't fill in a request that has conflict with any previous reservation. You know you are making critical decision when filling in the reservation forms because once a mistake is made, you will spend a lot more time fixing the problem either you or your assistants make. Another telephone rings and it's about a reservation of the wireless lab on some particular days and the professor also asks for some special computer software installed on the wireless laptops for that class. You write it down and tell him that you will check the lab for the software and respond him later. You finally have a chance to go to the bathroom. When returning to your office, you realize you need to set up 22 wireless laptops for a class in the wireless lab. You begin to search for the lab key in your office drawer. Unfortunately, the lab key is missing again. You kind of get annoyed because you have tried several times contacting the professors who use the labs often asking them to leave the key right in the lab for convenience sake after several hard attempts of getting the key back from the professors. You dash to one of your bosses' office to borrow her key to open the lab, hoping that you will get yours back in the lab. You are disappointed after you search the lab in vain. You quickly take out 22 laptops from the iron cabinet and set them all up and put them in a working state. Then you realize that somebody is waiting for you at your office door. You politely say "Hi, can I help you?" She will say, "That's why I am here." You help her fill in her PowerPoint presentation reservation form and check back and forth your reservation folder to ensure that there is no conflict. If it's in Smartboard room, you have to arrange a tutorial session for her before her actual presentation day. You realize that she is the third one coming today to reserve equipment for comprehensive examination paper presentations. You are very careful in filling these reservation forms to avoid mistakes and to save trouble for you. Your job is critical to every client and yourself.

You check the time and find that you have only half an hour left for your shift but you still have to set up two PowerPoint presentations in two classrooms before you leave. You take the equipment and dash to Room 225 on the second floor, efficiently set up the Infocus projector and the PC laptop. You try to switch the modes three times to make the connection between the Infocus projector and the computer. You can't make it work. As more and more students come into the classroom, you get hectic but still you are trying your best. Finally the connection is made after you keep switching the two mode-shifting keys many times on the computer. You plug in the little antenna-like receiver into the

computer in order for the professor to be able to use the remote controller for her PowerPoint slides. Everything works perfectly now. You feel lucky because there is still time for the class to begin and you didn't delay their class. Just then the professor comes in and whispers to you, "You know what, I don't need the projector today". You feel somewhat surprised and unhappy but still as a student, you can't show any of such an attitude otherwise you will be having trouble keeping this assistantship job if the professor goes to your bosses to complain about your attitudes. You have to pretend to smile at the professor and say to her very carefully and politely, "Would you please let us know a little bit earlier next time if you don't want to use the equipment?" Her "sure" reply makes you feel a little bit better though this is the third time she cancels her weekly reservation in such a way this semester. In your heart you keep the questions for the professor: Do you value our labor and our work? Do you know that other clients are turned down when they request for the same equipment at the same time because you reserve them earlier than they do and we give priority to you according to our "first come first serve" policy? Even if you can't have time to call our office for the cancellation, can't your TA call our office for you to cancel? You get confused because you almost see her TA every day either in the school or in the village where you live. You are smart enough not to release your questions to her or her TA but quickly shut down the projector and the computer and take apart the connection. You make a quick decision about using this equipment to set up in the next classroom but you realize that the next professor is asking for a Mac laptop but not PC. You have to dash down to the basement office again and to get the right equipment. This time you are lucky in setting up the equipment and making a smooth connection because not a single problem occurs. On your way back to the office, you feel kind of released because it's the end of your 3-hour shift on that day and you can leave the office to go to the Learning Commons in the library to rewrite your reaction paper # 1 for your critical literacy and pedagogy class.

Unfortunately, you see your office telephone flashing its light and you know there is an urgent message for you to check. You put in the password after you dial the checking message number. You know that one of your bosses wants you to go to her office as soon as possible after you hear the message. You dash to her office upstairs, totally not realizing that you caused some trouble to yourself the day before. Your boss's serious-looking face surprises you. You still have to say "Hi!" to her. She asked, "What's going on between you and Rai? You know that it's your job to arrange his shifts to be covered when he goes to a conference. We pay you a little bit higher because you are the supervisor and you are supposed to make the arrangements when any of your assistants goes to conferences, has exams, gets sick, or has some emergency. You can't ask Rai to arrange the shifts himself." Hearing this, you realize that it's your yesterday's email to one of your assistants who asks 6 shifts leaves within several weeks that causes you the trouble. You managed to cover his previous two shifts already and you had to rearrange your appointments with your study group and one appointment with your adviser for that. Now he is asking 4 shift leaves again. You have already talked with him about his leaves. You asked him whether he was going to present at the conference and he said "No, only participating." Then you said nicely to him, "If you don't present, I prefer you stay here because I really have difficulty getting your shifts covered. My schedules are full and none of the other assistants can work for you. You know we are very busy these days."

He didn't respond and so you assumed he kind of agreed with your suggestion. Yesterday when you finally completed your busy shift and got a seat in the Learning Commons getting ready to work with your study group partner, you got Rai's email telling you that he was leaving soon for the AERA conference in California. You were so upset because you would have to rearrange your schedule again in order to cover his 4 shifts. You were kind of annoyed by his frequent leaves because these are the busier days and on each shift there are a lot of things going on. While your study partner left for the bathroom you were writing Rai a short email reply by jokingly saying that he was "a trouble maker" since he is taking so many arbitrary leaves though you know you have to manage to reschedule your time to cover his 4 shifts. You totally didn't expect that short email would cause even further trouble to you and endangered your teaching assistantship position for the coming academic year. From the bottom of your heart, you know that some graduates are waiting for a chance to replace you as it's hard to get other teaching assistantship positions. You didn't remember how you responded to your boss's questions but you remember that tears were in your eyes as you left her office. As you came down to the office, it's already half an hour later and another assistant was in the office already. She was confused as she saw your red eyes. You know it's wise not to talk about unhappy moments particularly relating to the job and you manage to have a happy mood while debriefing what have been done and need to be done next on her shift. You finally put your backpack on your back and ready to leave the office but another professor comes in to ask whether you could provide a wireless keyboard in the Smartboard room and whether you can provide a remote controller for PowerPoint slides for that particular Infocus projector. You know that you are the only person who can report these issues to your bosses and then they will let you know whether you can give a positive or a negative answer to these questions. You politely respond to the professor that you need to talk to your bosses and will write him an email later to let him know the result. You know the chances of that are slim because of the budget cut and it's your responsibility to report any request beyond your ability to your bosses. Finally you get the chance to leave that floor and hide yourself in a corner of the lounge to have your carrots and two pieces of bread with only one piece of cheese in between but nothing else as your late lunch. You go out of the building and get on a PVRTA bus and head for the library. You feel kind of lucky that day because you don't have to go to a class meeting at 4 p.m. for the courses you take this semester.

When you arrive at the library, you find that all the computers are in use and there is a short line for potential available computers. You quickly join in the line and wait about 5 minutes before you can get one. You sit down at a computer and unconsciously you click Internet and go to UMail again though you have checked them during your office hours for reservations. Surprisingly you get an email from another assistant telling you that she has to take an exam on Thursday and so she can't work on her shift. You are more than annoyed by all these arbitrary leaves but this time you have learned to be smart not to call her a "trouble maker" though she really disturbs your life. You respond to her, "It's OK. Good luck with your exam!" though you really want to say, "God damn your exam because you add mess not only to my schedule but also to my daughter's." You know that you have to call to cancel and reschedule your daughter's pediatrician appointment because of this leave. You know, you can't say "No" to any leaves as you

are learning from the assistant, Rai, who not only takes arbitrary leaves and but also goes to one of your bosses complaining about your “bad management skills” just because you asked him not to go to the AERA conference as he was not presenting. You go to the next email and find it’s about some teeth whitening products. You realize you need to delete some newly appearing junk emails. When you come to a subject saying “educ 219 human development course”, you hesitate for a moment because it looks like a course advertisement but luckily you click on it and find that you almost make a mistake by deleting it. It’s an equipment reservation, and it’s a regular weekly reservation on the other side of the campus, 20 minutes walk from your office. The client, a TA in early childhood education, asks you to reply as soon as possible and you know you have to get permission from one of your bosses first because it’s an out-of-building reservation. You quickly walk towards a campus phone in the corner of the library and find you have to wait for the previous person to complete her call. You don’t want to waste your time waiting and so you walk to the lady’s room. When you come back, you call your bosses but the line is busy. You decide to send them an email but you have to write the client an email immediately telling her that you will need to report that request to your bosses and once you get response from them, you will let her know. You don’t hope your bosses to give “yes” response because you will have to arrange whomever on that shift to set up the equipment for the TA and make clear to your assistant what need to be paid attention to. You know that though nobody says “no” to you when you assign a task on their shifts but some assistants don’t feel happy to be assigned to the other side of the campus on a regular basis carrying the heavy equipment all the way there, especially on a rainy, stormy or snowy day!

Finally, there is an email about a good piece of news telling you that your paper, “Computer Means/Changes My Life: ESL Students and Computer-mediated Technology”, will be accepted for publication if you follow the feedback sheet to revise it within the deadline. You know it means a lot of hard work again but you feel happy about it because it will be your first publication in this country. You have tried very hard writing a research paper for the Journal of Pragmatics and waited for a year. When finally there is an email from the editor telling you that you might have a chance to get it published if you revise it dramatically. As you read those two reviewers’ feedback, you realize the potential hardship you will have to go through following their feedback and you just want to give it up completely. But this time you have hope because you know how to tailor your paper already from the editor’s email. As you just open the attachment for the positive feedback and revision suggestions, you realize that you need to pick up your daughter from her daycare before 4:15. You get a little bit nervous as you recheck your watch for the exact time because you clearly know being late picking up your child from her day care center for one minute means one dollar fine and they are serious about the rules to ensure the regularity of their teachers and staff’s lives. You have about 7 minutes to walk to the bus stop. You quickly quit from your OIT email account, log out and give the computer to other people waiting.

You are quick enough to catch Bus 34 and in about 8 minutes you arrive at the University Childcare Center. You feel that you are quite a good time keeper because it’s 4:12 p.m. You still have 3 minutes to go. You see your daughter running towards you,

smiling with runny nose on her face. You pick her up and give her a hug first before you tell her to say goodbye to her teachers and she lifts her little hand to wave goodbye. You take her to the classroom from their outdoor playground to sign her out on the daily check-in and check-out place. You find one of her mittens is not in her cubby. You search around in vain and then give up because you remember that you will have to hurry to catch the bus so that you won't be late driving your son to his baseball practice. You are lucky to catch the bus after waiting for only 3 minutes this time. You take out some tissue to wipe out your daughter's runny nose and she is searching for your nursing place. You check around on the bus and find you and your daughter are the only passengers and you offer your daughter one breast to feed her when the bus goes on to campus. Then you and your daughter get off the bus and transfer to the one taking you to your village bus stop. You remember that you asked your son to wait for you at 4:25 p.m. in C parking lot where you usually park but when you arrive there it is 4:35 p.m. and your son is not there. You think he must have lost patience waiting for you and must have walked to the practice field himself since it's only 15 minutes walk from the village. You want to check whether he is home. So you want to take your daughter home straightly but she wants to play outside as the weather is perfect for playing. You have to take her home by force. Your apartment door is open and your son is standing there telling you that he forgets about the baseball practice. You ask him to be quick to get in the car and you are not surprised at his oblivion as you have learned many times from your personal experience that "such a father, such a son".

You drive your son with your daughter to the baseball practice field. Your daughter is struggling to get out off the car as she sees the interesting playground outside. You tell yourself, "OK, let her play for a little while since I don't have to hurry home". There on the playground, you forget about the fatigue and the headache of the details from your work. You forget about your weekly course reading and writing assignment. You forget about your having to revise your manuscript on time. You forget about your anxious waiting for the feedback on your comprehensive examination papers from your adviser. You forget about your monthly rent bills and your daughter's monthly daycare bills. You forget about your son's school raffle package (asking you to help sell raffle tickets to collect money for their class trip to Boston) and baseball raffle tickets (asking you to help sell baseball raffle tickets to collect money for the community baseball games). You know that selling the raffle tickets to your neighbors or friends to collect money for whatever purposes is not something practiced and accepted in your own culture. It's just considered as a nice way of begging and you definitely don't want to do that. You might end up having to donate some money to your son's class and the community baseball game because of your failure to help sell the raffle tickets. You forget about the confusion you get from your critical literacy and pedagogy teacher who asked you to rewrite your reaction paper #1. Actually you finished writing that reaction paper one week before the critical teacher sent the class through email the guidelines and the sample of writing reaction paper because by finishing that assignment earlier you thought you could better concentrate yourself on your other writings. Unexpectedly, your critical teacher asked you to rewrite that paper because you didn't follow her sample. "Haste makes it slow" is a lesson you learn from the critical literacy class. You feel somewhat confused because on the one hand she said in a class meeting that you don't have to follow her sample but

on the other hand she wrote you an email with her feedback attached telling you that you have to do the writing again because your writing didn't follow her guidelines and she particularly asked you to read her sample carefully. On another occasion, she said in a class meeting that she didn't give detailed feedback to each individual on their autoethnography assignment because she was not sure how much response each of you wanted from her. She did say in class that if an individual needed her detailed feedback, she/he just emails to let her know and she would respond in detail. You emailed her right after that class politely asking her to provide detailed feedback to you on your autoethnography assignment because you want to try to get it published somewhere. You keep checking emails in vain. Up to now you haven't received any detailed feedback on your autoethnography assignment from the critical teacher who claims that one of her course objectives is to help her students improve their academic writing skills and get their work published, which is the major reason that you chose to take this course with her. You get so confused by what the critical teacher says and does at least to you.

There on the playground, you forget the trouble your husband causes to you because of his frequent oblivion in the daily routines. You forget about the unhappy moments when you try hard to search for your daughter's painting work in vain among her class painting exhibition on the childcare center's entrance wall. You also don't see your child much in their class activity video as you see other kids in her class a lot. Some kids get shown in the CD video doing different activities for around 3 to 4 minutes while your daughter appeared for 5 seconds only at the end of the video. You once thought of making an inquiry to her teachers but after careful consideration you quitted the idea because you think that once you offend her teachers you can't expect them to take good care of your toddler since she is the youngest one in that class. But these things make you annoyed from time to time when again and again you realize that your daughter becomes invisible in their class activities. You know that in this multicultural class setting, theoretically speaking, the weak, the less capable, and the youngest children should be given at least as equal opportunities in class activity participation as the privileged kids. Since your toddler only speaks several one-syllable words in her native language, you can't get anything from her as to how she is treated in her class. It's a stingy pain lingering around you from time to time when you can't find your daughter's work while other kids' work become very visible to you. There on the playground, you forget all the pains and agonies you have in your life! There on the playground, you don't have to think about the real meaning of social justice and critical pedagogy. There on the playground, you get to play with your daughter wholeheartedly like an angel! You climb up the slide after her, try to keep body balance when you walk after her on the elastic bouncing bridge to the top of the big slide, help her sit on the right place, getting ready to slide and say "yi, er, san, kaishi!" ("one, two, three, go!"). You see her off the top sliding all the way down and you quickly stand up stretching your head forward to see whether she is OK at the bottom of the snake-shaped slide. You see her sweet smile and wave to her, "Good job, Meimei, come this way. Let's do another one!"

Finally, you realize you need to drive your daughter back home to give her a bath and do the daily clothes washing for her. You have to lie to her that you will give her something delicious to eat and so she stops being disobedient and allows you to fasten her into her car seat. You drive back and walk towards your home. When you pass by the

village laundry room, your daughter insists that you take her to the village laundry room for free used toys by pointing to the laundry room. You open the door and walk in with her. There on the big table she finds two toys: a bear and a frog. She is happy because she loves stuffed toys. This time you do not have any trouble taking her back home as she can play with the “new” toys! You go to the kitchen to put some rice in the electronic cooker and plug in the power cord while your daughter is playing with the “new toys” on the floor. You wash the vegetables that you need to cook for the supper. You prepare the bath water and ask your daughter to be ready. She is striking because she doesn’t want to be interrupted with her playing with the toys. You have to say “Meimei, I’ll give you a bath and you will give the little bear a bath” first in English and then in your native language when you realize that you have to provide your children a Chinese speaking environment as you don’t expect them to lose their native language. She seems to agree. You undress her and put her in the bathtub. She likes playing in the water once she is in. You can wash her clothes and do other arrangements while she is playing in the bathtub. After a while, you realize it’s time to pick up your son from his baseball practice. You take your baby out of her bathtub and dress her in clean clothes while telling her that she can play on the playground again when getting her brother back. You drive to the baseball field in time to get your son back.

Arriving home, you see the dad in the kitchen. You are not happy because you know that the food he cooks is mainly up to his own taste. You don’t want to initiate another argument on this because you two have been arguing for how to make cooking suit everyone’s taste, including the baby’s and the previous arguments produce no result. He bakes the beef again, salty and spicy, which is totally beyond the baby’s ability to chew. If you can choose you will choose to cook beef in soup because you know that your baby loves softly cooked beef slices and she can hold a slice in her hand walking here and there while eating. All you have to do is to keep silent to avoid an argument and if the baby doesn’t eat her normal amount you might later cook something else for her. Surely the baby doesn’t eat well though you try to feed her more. Later you steam some apple with a little bit of honey to fill the baby’s stomach and to help cure her cough as well, which is a Chinese folk practice of using food as medicine. At around 9 p.m. you take your baby to bed and read several books to her before she goes to sleep. For some Mother Goose Stories and Rhymes, you can already recite to your baby and still she is interested in listening to them again and again. Finally she falls into sound sleep.

You struggle hard to open your eyes and get up. It’s almost 10:30 p.m. You set up your home laptop computer, turn it on and get ready to do your school assignment. Somehow you click Internet Explore, dial up the connection, and check your emails again with a ray of hope of getting an email response from your adviser. You get annoyed again when you have not received any feedback on your comprehensive examination papers that you submitted to her two and a half month ago. You begin to write another email to your adviser, politely asking whether she can give you an appointment this week to talk about your comps papers’ status. Then you cancel the email that you just wrote because you think it might offend your adviser by urging her to give you “quick” feedback. You know she is busy and she goes to present at many conferences. She has several administrative responsibilities. You clearly remember that you just asked her to write a

recommendation letter for your conference travel grant application and you also asked her to write a letter to help you extend your student status as your student visa will be expired on August 31. Helplessly you log out your email and switch back to do some course reading for your critical literacy and pedagogy class. This time you are reading Ellis and Bochner's book chapter, *Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, and Reflexivity*. You love reading it because you feel it is like reading a novel in an academic setting. You get so excited about it and decide that autoethnography will be a portion of your coming dissertation. You want to explore more about autoethnography because all these years in the doctoral program, you have been struggling following the American academic discourse conventions when writing "academic papers" and you feel so tired of these conventions because they are tedious, dry, monotonous, complicated and repetitive. Now autoethnography teaches you something new by combining personal stories with scientific researches. You are enlightened by the new way of doing qualitative research: "thinking like an ethnographer and writing like a novelist" (Ellis, 2004, p.330). You feel like you finally acquire an effective way of writing interesting research papers. You want to start right away but you check the time and find it's already 3:05 a.m. It's high time you went to bed. Otherwise you will have trouble getting up the next morning when your son's alarm clock rings. You quickly brush your teeth, do the flossing, wash your face and feet and sneak onto your bed. Unfortunately your baby wakes up for peed. You nurse her while helping her peed. In this way, she won't make any sound to wake up her brother and her dad. Finally she closes her little eyes and goes back to sleep again. Now you can lie down and get some sleep, thinking autoethnography will be part of your dissertation! Yeah!

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