



## Article

# Negotiating Learner Autonomy in a Cross-cultural, Emancipatory Academic Environment: An Autoethnographic Study

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## Abstract

In an era of accelerating globalization, an increasing number of scholars cross national borders and accumulate international academic experiences, bringing both opportunities and challenges. This autoethnography explores the challenges that I, a Vietnamese PhD student, encountered while navigating learner autonomy within a cross-cultural, emancipatory academic environment in the US. Drawing on my retrospective narrative, in-depth interviews with my academic advisor, and a reflective journal, I narrate my journey of negotiating the newly found freedom in a PhD program driven by emancipatory pedagogy. The process reveals learner autonomy as a complex, non-linear negotiation shaped by different environmental factors, especially the roles of my academic advisor. Thanks to the development of learner autonomy, I slowly turned into an independent scholar, but the process prompted critical reflections on the tension between my traditional Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) values and the newly acquired emancipatory ideals. The paper may help international PhD students to better navigate their studies in new cultural and academic environments. It may also help PhD supervisors, including those in Nordic countries, become more aware of potential challenges and develop alternative strategies for working with doctoral students from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, it may offer insights into how a more emancipatory academic environment might be reimagined in CHC contexts.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, learner autonomy, self-directed learning (SDL), Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), emancipatory pedagogy



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# Introduction

Learner autonomy has been a central theme in language education for more than four decades (Benson, 2013). Early studies largely emphasized strategies for fostering autonomy, with the belief that learner autonomy is associated with improved academic achievement (Little, 1991; Reinders, 2010). Over time, however, this construct has broadened and intersected with other related notions such as self-directed learning (SDL), informal or out-of-class learning, and, more recently, student agency. In specific contexts, scholars have introduced further refinements—for example, Sundqvist (2009) advanced the concept of extramural English (EE) to capture learners’ autonomous engagement with English beyond formal classrooms in Nordic settings. This evolution reflects the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of learner autonomy, showing how the construct has been continually redefined to account for diverse learning environments and theoretical perspectives.

While most scholarship on learner autonomy has concentrated on K–12 and undergraduate students, little attention has been paid to autonomy among postgraduate students. This gap may be due to the assumption that postgraduate students are, by definition, already autonomous, rendering further inquiry unnecessary. Such an assumption, however, is problematic because learner autonomy is culturally situated and open to diverse interpretations across different sociocultural contexts (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Toohey & Norton, 2003). For instance, postgraduate students from Confucian heritage cultures, such as Vietnam, may conceptualize autonomy in ways that are significantly different from their counterparts in North America or Scandinavia. This raises critical questions about how postgraduate students from the former cultural contexts negotiate autonomy within the latter, particularly where emancipatory pedagogy has a more visible presence in the educational system. Exploring the relationship between learner autonomy, Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) cultures, and emancipatory pedagogy is crucial for understanding postgraduate learning experiences of Vietnamese students.

This autoethnographic paper narrates my lived experiences as a Vietnamese doctoral student in an emancipatory PhD program in the US. The challenges I encountered and the negotiations I undertook compelled me to reflect critically on the values, beliefs, and assumptions that I carried with me across cultural and academic borders. Over the course of six years, the interaction between my CHC heritage and the program’s emancipatory pedagogy gradually turned me into an independent scholar—though the journey was marked by multiple struggles and many moments of disorientation. This bothersome transformation not only helped me to reimagine myself but also expanded my cultural repertoire and sharpened my professional practice. In doing so, the paper sheds light on how learner autonomy at the postgraduate level is negotiated across sociocultural contexts and pedagogical traditions.

### 3 Negotiating Learner Autonomy in a Cross-cultural, Emancipatory Academic Environment

Based upon the interpretive and postmodern traditions of qualitative inquiry, this study employs autoethnography as a means to narrate my personal experiences within a broader academic and cultural context. While autoethnography does not claim to achieve objectivity, it offers a legitimate way of generating situated knowledge and critical self-reflection (Ellis et al., 2011). In this sense, I view my narrative not merely as an individual sharing but also as a potential source of insight for others who are navigating similar cross-cultural and pedagogical challenges. The data for this study were drawn from a written narrative based on memories, interviews with my academic advisor, and my ongoing reflective journal. Specifically, the paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How did I develop my autonomy in an emancipatory PhD program in the US?
2. What was the role of my academic advisor in this process of personal transformation?
3. How did I negotiate learner autonomy between Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and emancipatory pedagogy as a PhD student?

Because this paper is grounded in my subjective experiences within a particular PhD program, its generalizability is relatively limited. Nevertheless, it offers insights for those seeking to construct more emancipatory academic environments in CHC contexts such as Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan. It may also be of value to supervisors and doctoral students from different cultural and academic backgrounds who are striving to cultivate more fruitful advisor–advisee relationships.

## Literature review

Learner autonomy is conceptualized as the central focus of this paper. It is a dynamic construct that is shaped by two opposing ideological forces: CHC values and emancipatory ideals. While CHC traditions tend to constrain autonomy through hierarchical relationships and collective norms, emancipatory pedagogy seeks to expand it by empowering learners as critical, self-directed individuals. The following section reviews each of these key concepts in turn—beginning with learner autonomy, followed by CHC culture, and concluding with emancipatory pedagogy.

### Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy serves as a central conceptual framework for this paper. Originating in the field of language education, the concept has undergone continuous development over the past four decades. For example, Holec (1981), commonly considered the ‘father’ of this term, defines it as learners’ ability to take charge of their own learning. Likewise, David Little (1991), another respected scholar in language education, emphasizes that autonomous learners must possess the capability of engaging in critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. Building on these definitions, Benson (2013) refers to learner autonomy as the ability to take control of one’s own learning management, cognitive processes,

and content.

Despite its origin in language education, learner autonomy has also been found in other academic disciplines. For instance, in adult and lifelong learning, it has been used interchangeably with self-directed learning (SDL) (Candy, 1991). SDL refers to a process in which individuals take the initiative to identify their learning needs, set goals, select strategies, and evaluate outcomes, often outside formal educational structures (Knowles, 1975). While SDL emphasizes independence and personal responsibility, it tends to view learning as an individual endeavor detached from institutional and relational dynamics. In contrast, learner autonomy focuses on the learner's capacity to take charge of their learning within educational settings, in interaction with teachers, peers, and cultural contexts (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981), not as a static disposition. Since this study is concerned with negotiating my sense of autonomy within a structured PhD program, influenced by cross-cultural tensions and pedagogical relationships, the concept of learner autonomy, rather than SDL, would provide a more context-sensitive and relational lens through which to analyze my transformative learning experience.

Another related concept that has recently gained momentum in educational studies is learner agency. It refers to the "socioculturally mediated" capacity of learners to make meaningful choices and take action to shape their own learning and the surrounding environment (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). Agency is considered by many as the origin of autonomous actions (Benson, 2013). Although agency could be relevant to the current paper, I decided to settle on the concept of *learner autonomy* since it connotes a relatively more stable trait that, though negotiable, may take longer to transform. On the other hand, learner agency refers to a more dynamic, constantly changing state.

In summary, learner autonomy is characterized by three primary features: (1) the learner's ability to take responsibility for and exercise control over their own learning, (2) the role of critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action in sustaining this control, and (3) the inherently relational and contextual nature of autonomy, shaped through interaction with teachers, peers, and cultural environments.

## Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC)

Learner autonomy and creativity are believed to be constrained by the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) values (Ho, 2020; Huang & Asghar, 2018; Littlewood, 1999; Zhao, 2022). CHC refers to the shared cultural values of East and Southeast Asian societies that are under the influence of Confucianism, including China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan (Evers et al., 2011). The impact of this wisdom tradition has been so enduring and pervasive that it has become deeply and seamlessly embedded in these cultures. In Vietnam, for example, Confucian influence is evident in traditional beliefs and practices such as filial piety, ancestor worship, and respect for hierarchical relationships in family and society. At its core, Confucianism seeks to

cultivate a peaceful, prosperous, and ethical world—but all beginning with self-cultivation (Chan & Rao, 2009).

First, Confucianism emphasizes a respect for hierarchy. Drawing on the doctrines of the Rectification of Names, the Three Fundamental Bonds, and the Five Core Virtues (Legge, 1887), people are expected to fulfill their roles and titles in accordance with reality, thereby maintaining relational ethics. These hierarchies are most visible in relationships between rulers and subjects, husbands and wives, parents and children, and teachers and students. In particular, the teacher's role is strongly emphasized, as reflected in the Vietnamese proverb, 'One word makes a teacher, half a word still makes a teacher' ('Một chữ cũng là thầy, nửa chữ cũng là thầy'), which suggests that even minimal knowledge imparted by the teacher still establishes a lifelong obligation of respect. The teacher is often symbolically conflated with parents, reinforcing filial piety as a model for student behavior. This parallel is reflected in the saying, 'A good child, an excellent student' ('Con ngoan, trò giỏi'). Although these hierarchical relationships have been redefined by the democratic movements of the 20th century, they continue to persist in people's minds, subtly influencing their language, behavior, and the ways they position themselves in relation to others (Rozman, 2014).

Another central tenet of Confucianism is its emphasis on self-cultivation as the foundation of relational ethics. Confucius argued that personal cultivation must precede all other virtues: it is the basis for building families, governing nations, and ultimately creating world peace. In practice, self-cultivation involves fulfilling the duties attached to one's social roles—as a parent, child, spouse, teacher, student, ruler, or subject. While self-cultivation may sound individualistic, it is not aligned with Western notions of individualism. Rather, it is deeply relational, oriented towards harmony and a collective identity. In this view, individuals are defined by their families, communities, and institutions (Wang & Liu, 2010; Winfield et al., 2000;). This collectivist mindset continues to shape everyday communication in many CHC societies, as documented in cross-cultural communication textbooks (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Warren, 2017).

These Confucian values have, over the years, subtly nurtured the beliefs, language practices, and behaviors of students in CHC cultures, who are often characterized by their limited classroom autonomy and obedience (Zhao, 2009; 2022).

### **Emancipatory pedagogy**

While CHC is believed to constrain learner autonomy, emancipatory pedagogy is assumed to enhance it. This progressive educational approach seeks to liberate learners from oppression through alternative assumptions and practices. It has been contributed to by multiple critical theorists, such as Foucault (1975), Giroux (1988), McLaren (1994), hooks (1994), Ladson-Billings (1994), Popkewitz (1998), and so on.

However, Paulo Freire and Jacques Rancière seemed to have the most prominent presence in my PhD program (2011–2017), at least from my perspective and within my immediate circle of friends and professors at the time. Their presence was so dominant that other ideologies—and even the subject matter itself—seemed to be overshadowed.

Freire (2000) is known for his critique of the ‘banking model’ of education, where teachers “deposit” information into students, who function as passive recipients. According to him, students should talk, ask questions, and learn from each other, instead of just listening to the instructors. Freire also believes that real education must help people understand the world so that they can change it for the better. He calls this “education as the practice of freedom” (p. 25). On the other hand, Jacques Rancière (1991), a French philosopher, contributes to emancipatory pedagogy by theorizing that no one is inherently more intelligent than another. Specifically, teachers are not inherently more intelligent than their students, and therefore, learning occurs through the acts of will and attention, rather than explication. For example, by paying close attention to the students’ learning, a teacher, even without subject matter knowledge, may still be able to ensure that the students make progress in their learning. In line with this logic, Rancière argues that for emancipatory pedagogy to be possible, education must be conducted with the assumption of equality right at the beginning. In other words, equality is not an expected learning outcome, but a prerequisite of education. He calls for the so-called ‘redistribution of the sensible’, which changes who gets heard and seen in society in general and in the classroom in particular. Below are some key descriptions of Freire and Rancière’s theories that resonated the most with me:

- *Education as a practice of freedom* (Freire, 2000): Education is not only a matter of adapting to the social norms, but more importantly, a liberatory process of understanding and changing them for the better.
- *Critical consciousness* (Freire, 2000): Education should enable students to look critically at the world around them and take action against oppression.
- *Dialogue-centered learning* (Freire, 2000): Learning is grounded in dialogues between the teachers and the students and among the students, and these stakeholders learn from one another.
- *Assumption of equality* (Rancière, 1991): Equality should not be considered an outcome of education, but an assumption upon which education is conducted.
- *Rejection of intellectual hierarchy* (Rancière, 1991): No one is inherently more intelligent than another. For this reason, teaching is not a matter of explanation but rather is an act of will and attention.

In summary, CHC and emancipatory pedagogy represent two opposite ends of a continuum along which learner autonomy is negotiated and possibly developed. These two ideological forces shape how learners interpret and construct their autonomy within specific academic contexts. This negotiation process is often accompanied by dilemmas and internal struggles that are deeply intertwined with learners’ worldviews and identities. For these reasons, it deserves further investigation.

## Research methods

### Research participant

This ethnographic paper centers on me, in relation to my academic advisor, the PhD program at Michigan State University (MSU), and the socio-cultural and academic contexts of Vietnam, which shaped my upbringing, my education, and my current scholarly work.

I was born to a traditional Vietnamese family in the south of Vietnam, where my childhood was immersed in the socialist ideals and the Confucian teachings. At school, I was taught patriotism, social justice, and class struggle, which made up a large proportion of my school curriculum. However, in comparison, Confucianism had a more profound and long-lasting impact on the Vietnamese people, including myself. As I mentioned earlier, Confucianism is not an organized religion, but its core ideological tenets have quietly but profoundly shaped the Vietnamese culture for thousands of years. I was implicitly taught to respect the elders, especially my parents and my teachers, to love our home country, and especially to strive for the best academic results. I participated in a lot of examinations for outstanding students—at the school, district, provincial, and national levels. I was also taught by my father that education was the best way to escape poverty.

Our schooling culture gradually internalized within me a strong spirit of compliance, competition, and instrumentality. My early education was summarized in this slogan, “A good child, an excellent student” (“Con ngoan, trò giỏi”). “A good child” implies an obedient child who would follow the teachings of his parents and teachers without questioning them. “An excellent student” refers to someone who achieves outstanding academic results through score reports, trophies, and credentials. I never knew my true passion, and critical thinking was unknown until university.

After high school, I went to university to be trained as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher. I then earned my Master’s degree in the same field. I began my PhD studies in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education (CITE) at MSU when I was 29. My initial goal was to develop an innovative English curriculum for Vietnamese students. However, after I was admitted into the program, I soon realized that my PhD journey would not be as straightforward as I had anticipated.

In short, I consider myself an introverted and shy person. This disposition was further enhanced by my family traditions and school environments, which were both driven by Confucianism, implicitly but strongly. My reading of the critical theory, and especially my immersion into an emancipatory PhD program, indeed transformed me significantly—into an independent scholar.



## **The PhD Program in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education (CITE)**

MSU boasts a top PhD program in CITE in the US. This program includes different specializations, such as social studies education, science education, math education, comparative education, language and literacy, critical studies, curriculum theory, and so on. Despite these diverse specializations, the program's overall academic culture was dominated by critical theory. Themes such as diversity, inclusivity, empowerment, inequality, etc., were widely present in the program's discourse. When I was there, the program had about 30 faculty members working in different areas of study, with different academic and cultural backgrounds. Originally, I was placed in the sub-area of language and literacy, which had 3 professors, two of whom were also appointed in the second language studies program.

Like most other PhD programs in the US, my PhD program was marked by several key milestones, such as Preliminary Exam (after the first semester), Research Practicum, Comprehensive Exam (after the completion of coursework), Proposal Defense, and finally, Dissertation Defense. After completing around 24 credits of coursework, PhD students would take the Comprehensive Exam, and if they pass it, they will earn the new title: PhD candidate. Each PhD candidate works with four or five committee members, one of whom serves as academic advisor. Coursework was an opportunity for PhD students to explore different sub-areas and research methodologies, which may make them change their minds about their research directions. When I was there, this change was quite uncommon but was said to be completely acceptable. As I mentioned earlier, I originally intended to develop an innovative English curriculum for Vietnamese students, and therefore, was assigned a tentative academic advisor in language and literacy. However, after completing the first-year coursework, I decided to switch to a new sub-area: curriculum theory. I needed to switch to a new academic advisor.

Apart from formal coursework and other key academic milestones as described above, my PhD program was noted for its emancipatory ideals, where PhD students had easy access to faculty members and multiple opportunities to meet with big scholars, who may come as guest speakers in our regular classes or as speakers for workshops or symposiums. Almost no professors would say no to a meeting request from a doctoral student. In this way, doctoral students in this program could easily meet and discuss their research interests with their potential advisors and committee members. In addition, each PhD student in my program also had one fully funded opportunity to participate in a 2 to 3-week study abroad program led by one faculty member. In particular, the program also had a couple of open classes where students and professors are welcome to come and go any time. For example, I joined the Critical Studies Group every Friday afternoon for several years of my program.

In short, the PhD program in CITE at MSU is an emancipatory one where PhD students are equipped with a broad academic foundation through coursework, an equitable relationship with faculty members, and



multiple informal academic opportunities. Most importantly, it is underpinned by critical theory, especially emancipatory pedagogy.

## Data collection and analysis

The data for this study were collected in a non-traditional, non-linear fashion through three channels: a retrospective written narrative, interviews with my academic advisor, and a reflective journal.

- Retrospective written narrative: During my six-year PhD program, I had rich experiences: meeting with my (second) academic advisor every two weeks, for half an hour each; working as a research assistant for two research projects; serving as a student representative on several departmental committees, and so on. Although I did not keep a formal record of my observations during those years, my experiences remain vivid in my memory. To ease data analysis, I recently wrote down a retrospective narrative (about 10 pages) describing my experiences during the program in a chronological order. This data source addresses the first and the third research questions.
- Interviews with my academic advisor: I conducted two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with my second academic advisor towards the end of my PhD program, to explore her beliefs and assumptions regarding her supervisory approach. A Foucault scholar, my advisor also expressed a strong interest in the works of Freire, Rancière, and other critical theorists. The interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, were semi-structured and audio-recorded. The interviews primarily address the second research question.
- Reflective journal: After returning to Vietnam, I have served as a lecturer, administrator, and especially academic advisor. I have kept a reflective journal about these roles in the past five years (about 80 pages). Although this journal reflects my ongoing experiences in Vietnamese academia, it is in many ways associated with my previous experiences as PhD student at MSU. Largely, my experiences in Vietnam have enabled me to understand my experiences at MSU more profoundly and thoroughly. Similarly, I believe that my time at MSU has had a significant impact on how I position myself in relation to my students, especially my advisees. This ongoing journal covers all three research questions.

To begin with, the interviews were transcribed using TurboScribe. Then, the retrospective narrative was written based on my memory recall. Both were then analyzed using the thematic analysis approach, following Creswell's (2013) guidelines. The ongoing reflective journal was used to add more depth to my interpretation of the data. Through three stages of coding—open, axial, and selective coding—as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), I constructed a chronological narrative of my six-year PhD journey at MSU, including *Early PhD*, *During PhD*, and *After PhD*.

As each key theme emerged from the data, I consulted my ongoing reflective journal to gain a deeper understanding of it. This reflective process was crucial, as the journal served as a reference point that allowed me to interpret my past experiences more profoundly. For instance, when “advising—not ordering” emerged as a theme, I referred to a 2019 journal entry in which a student expressed dissatisfaction with my suggestions as her advisor. On the contrary, my present experiences as an academic advisor, as noted in my reflective journal, may also inspire me to dig deeper into my memories and the

interviews with my advisor to gain insights into a certain matter. For example, a PhD student (not my advisee) recently told me about her intention to change her academic advisor and asked me how she should proceed with it, since this was such a sensitive matter in our Vietnamese culture. I was immediately reminded of my own difficulty as a doctoral student 10 years earlier. I then decided to add another principle to my working principles contract with my advisees by claiming that ‘Changing supervisors (if needed) is entirely acceptable’ and that, as their advisor, I would not take this request personally at all.

Below is a sample of my data analysis (Table 1):

**Table 1.** A sample of data analysis

| Written narrative                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Interviews with my advisor                                                                                                                                                              | Reflective journal                                                                                                                                                                   | Codes                                                                                                 | Theme                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>- ‘I proactively applied for the NEH scholarship and asked for reference letters from Lynn and Kyle, who were more than willing to write them in support of me. Six weeks later, I received the good news and spent five weeks studying Buddhism at the East-West Center in Hawaii’.</p> <p>- ‘I immediately emailed Rick Posner, author of ‘Lives of Passion, School of Hope’, and he responded half an hour later. He invited me to Colorado, and I flew there on an early flight the following week’.</p> | <p>‘My job as an academic advisor is to secure an infrastructure so that my students can freely develop as independent scholars.’</p> <p>(My advisor said in the interview in 2015)</p> | <p>‘Your mannerisms are so different from who you used to be—I barely recognized you at the meeting this week.’</p> <p>(A former Vietnamese colleague said to me in summer 2015)</p> | <p>(1) Radical transformation</p> <p>(2) Increasing autonomy</p> <p>(3) proactive decision-making</p> | <p><b>DEVELOPMENT INTO AN INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR</b></p> |

## Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness serves as the primary benchmark for ensuring the quality of qualitative research, including autoethnography. It encompasses four key criteria: credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For this study, I engaged in prolonged involvement with the research context (both in the US and in Vietnam), iterative reflexivity, triangulation (credibility), thick description (transferability), meticulous methodological documentation (dependability), and ongoing reflective journaling (confirmability).

As noted earlier, the data for this study were collected over a period of more than ten years, with reflective journaling continuing at the time of writing. To cross-check factual accuracy, data were triangulated from three primary sources: my reconstructed memories (developed into a written narrative), interviews with my academic advisor, and my ongoing reflective journal. I describe who I am and acknowledge the unavoidable bias (reflexivity) but figure out ways to mitigate it in data collection and interpretation, for instance, by providing rich contextual descriptions of both my PhD program and my professional background. I also endeavor to maintain transparency throughout the research process by thoroughly documenting and justifying methodological procedures and analytic decisions to the best of my ability.

## Research ethics

The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded with the consent of my advisor. The longitudinal, immersive observation was conducted informally within the CITE program, so no consent form was needed. However, the ongoing reflective journal, in which I write about myself, puts me in a highly vulnerable position. However, as vulnerable as it is, this study is a great opportunity for me to step back and reflect upon my past experiences and investigate my ongoing professional practice as a scholar and academic advisor, as will be narrated later in the Findings section.

As this paper relies primarily on retrospection, it may be prone to the tendency to foreground the more positive aspects of my doctoral experiences. Nonetheless, I have made deliberate efforts to balance both positive and negative perspectives. The negative experiences are presented in a carefully framed manner to minimize potential harm to the people involved, while also mitigating the nostalgic bias commonly associated with retrospective narratives.

## Findings

To ease reading this section, a summary of my academic journey is presented in Table 2 below. Then, the findings are divided into *Early PhD*, *During PhD*, and *After PhD*.

**Table 2.** A summary of my academic and professional journey

| Year(s) | Degree / Stage | Institution | Focus / Advisor | Notes |
|---------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------|
|---------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------|

|              |                         |                                                   |                                                                                                                                 |                                                                 |
|--------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2004         | BA in English Education | Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam | No advisor                                                                                                                      | Undergraduate foundation in English education                   |
| 2007         | MA in TESOL             | Canberra University, offshore program, Vietnam    | No advisor                                                                                                                      | Advanced training in language teaching                          |
| 2011         | PhD Admission           | MSU (US)                                          | Tentative Advisor in Language & Literacy (CHC background)                                                                       | Entered the Curriculum, Instruction & Teacher Education program |
| 2012         | Shift in Research Focus | MSU                                               | New Advisor in Curriculum Theory                                                                                                | After completing 1st-year coursework                            |
| 2017         | PhD Completion          | MSU                                               | Dissertation: 'Self-directed learning through the eyes of a Buddhist meditator: (non)judgment, (non)becoming, and (non)control' | PhD in Curriculum, Instruction & Teacher Education              |
| 2017–present | Academic Career         | Vietnamese Higher Education                       | Language education, curriculum theory, mindfulness                                                                              | Teaching, research, administration, and student service         |

## Early PhD

### Advisor change

After reading the critical theory in my first-year coursework, I had the intention to change my research direction and, consequently, my academic advisor. The Department Chair assured me that such a change was fully acceptable in the program. Nonetheless, I experienced intense fear, as changing advisors was

almost unimaginable in my home culture (CHC). For me, advisor change was not only an academic but also a moral decision. Subconsciously, I regarded my advisor as my parental figure—someone to whom I was supposed to owe deep respect and loyalty. In this sense, working with the new advisor felt like betraying the first one. However, I recognized that making this change was essential for my academic development. I did not dare to speak to my advisor face-to-face, but wrote her an email explaining my situation and informing her of my intention. Her reply showed her disappointment, which only intensified my sense of guilt. Her feeling of disappointment also manifested in our subsequent face-to-face interactions, which made me feel awkward.

I had never imagined myself taking such a bold step, particularly because my first advisor and I shared a common Confucian heritage. But here I was, challenging a deeply ingrained value system for the sake of my personal academic growth. To many, such a decision might appear ordinary, but for someone raised as a ‘good child, excellent student’, it required immense courage. It marked the very first time I decided against the will of a parental figure.

The discomfort I experienced during the advisor change process reveals an underlying assumption of inequality in the advisor–PhD student relationship—an assumption likely shaped by the CHC that both my advisor and I shared. While changing advisors is rarely an easy process for any PhD student, regardless of cultural backgrounds, the shared CHC values of hierarchy, loyalty, and respect for teachers made this experience particularly unsettling.

### **Forms of address**

In my very first meeting with my second academic advisor, she asked me to address her by her first name—a request that was astonishing to me. In Vietnamese culture, addressing someone of my mother’s age—and especially a professor—by their first name was unthinkable. It took me several months before I could do so without a lingering sense of unease and disrespect.

Her insistence on being addressed by her first name was partly cultural, but it was also due to her Foucauldian background. While other professors might also prefer first names, few would insist so strongly. As Foucault (1980) argues, language is not a neutral medium of communication but a vehicle of power and a mechanism of social regulation. My advisor regarded academic titles as markers of hierarchical authority that could disempower students; by deliberately rejecting them, she sought to lessen this hierarchy and foster a sense of equality. From her perspective, the choice of address was not trivial but was a pedagogical act of resistance, consistent with Freire’s and Rancière’s insistence that equality must be enacted in educational practice.

### **Soul-searching**

Probably the most important milestone in my PhD journey came when my new advisor asked me to make one serious promise—that I would write about something I was truly interested in, not about what others expected me to. She also firmly refused to suggest a thesis topic. I was both disappointed and stunned. No one had ever asked me about my genuine academic interests, and to be honest, I only had a vague sense of them. I had assumed that, as an EFL teacher, my interests had to lie in language education, but to be honest, this was not necessarily the only thing in my heart. My advisor told me to go home, do some soul searching, and see her again in two weeks. I felt both excited and nervous. I was excited because I had the opportunity to listen to my inner voice—something I had long forgotten after years of obedience. I was nervous because I realized that I had no idea what to do with this newfound freedom, and that my academic journey ahead would be uncertain. Compared with my peers, some of whom were collecting their data, I was falling far behind.

Two weeks later, I told her that I was interested in mindfulness and progressive education—much to my surprise and her utmost joy. I was also astonished by this revelation, because I had always considered mindfulness as my private spiritual practice, unrelated to my scholarly work. Progressive education, meanwhile, was an academic area, but I could not see its connection with my professional experience as an EFL teacher. I was also troubled by the seeming disconnect between the two—one rooted in spirituality, while the other in educational theory. However, my advisor was ecstatic about my confessed interests. She encouraged me to keep exploring them and assured me that they would converge in one way or another.

Her unwavering trust in my academic interests made me feel that what I cared about was not trivial and private but worthy of serious academic pursuit. In the interview, she explained that every individual had their own interests and passions, which were often suppressed by the social norms to the point that they were dismissed by the beholders themselves. She also emphasized that she expected her students to enjoy every step of their thesis-writing process, asking rhetorically: *‘If each of your steps is not enjoyable, how can you have a successful, enjoyable career?’* I could not agree with her more.

### **During PhD**

#### **Advising—not ordering**

I met my academic advisor every two weeks for half an hour each time. At each meeting, she would listen to me and share her advice, but she made clear from the outset that I did not have to follow it, stressing the distinction between ‘advice’ and ‘order.’ At first, I was confused, but I gradually adapted to it.

In my CHC culture, parents and teachers are viewed as unquestionable authorities, and children and students are expected to follow their instructions. My advisor's approach, however, reflected the spirit of emancipatory pedagogy, aligned with Paulo Freire's (1970) critique of the 'banking model' of education and Rancière's (1991) intellectual equality, where the teacher's task is not to deposit knowledge but to enhance the learner's capacity for independent learning. All in all, her refusal to impose a thesis topic, her insistence on soul-searching, and now her distinction between advice and order all directed me toward listening to my own voice and relying on myself throughout my academic journey.

To some extent, I was relieved that my advisor did not see herself as my exclusive source of wisdom. Instead, I was encouraged to broaden my horizons and, ultimately, to make my own decisions. I learned to consider 'independent decision-making' as the most important mission of my PhD studies. In my reflective journal, I wrote: *'The most noble goal of education is to turn an obedient, dependent student into a self-directed, independent one. Difficult but rewarding.'* I still hold this message close to my heart when supervising my students in Vietnam. Recently, a PhD student of mine remarked, *'Before meeting with you, I had never known how to listen to my inner voice seriously and honestly.'* This deeply resonated with my own experience when my advisor first asked me to promise to commit to what I was truly interested in.

#### **Development into an independent scholar**

With the newly earned freedom, I embarked on an independent journey of exploring mindfulness and progressive education—without anyone telling me what to do or how to do it. Every decision was mine to make, which I would then share with my advisor during our biweekly meetings. This was when I had to negotiate and, simultaneously, develop my autonomy most intensely. Often, I found myself in chaos, with no structures to lean on—except for the regular meetings with my advisor. My advisor offered no fixed guidance: not on which books to read, which research methodology to follow, or which conferences to go to. On the rare occasions when she did intervene more directly, she would give me several options rather than a single solution, leaving the final choice for me. Over time, I gradually learned to recognize my preferences more clearly, clarify my thoughts more quickly, articulate my preferences with more confidence, and make decisions with greater precision. Above all, I came to relish the absolute freedom—something I knew many of my peers must have envied.

To further explore mindfulness and progressive education, I proactively selected books to read, reached out to scholars I believed could inform my thesis project, and applied for grants to broaden my experiences. For example, I emailed Rick Posner, author of a book I loved, who invited me to visit the Jefferson County Open School in Colorado in 2015. There, I interviewed students, alumni, teachers, and parents, and later met the school's founder, who hosted me at his residence for a week and shared profound stories about



the school's history and philosophy. In 2015, I applied for the NEH summer program on Buddhism at the East-West Center in Hawaii and was successfully admitted into the program. In short, I had transformed—tremendously. A former colleague gave this remark about me in 2017, *'You are so different from who you used to be—I barely recognized you at the meeting this week.'* The remark was not about my physical appearance, but my mannerisms.

### **Post-qualitative inquiry**

As I reported earlier, my advisor did not impose anything on me—not even a research methodology. While she identified as a critical theorist, I gradually identified as a social scientist. Still, I followed her central advice: exploring my two main topics until they would eventually converge. In my third year, a colleague asked me about my research methodology, and I admitted to her that I had no idea. She was surprised, wondering how I could begin a dissertation without selecting a methodology. She was right, but I was honest with her. However, I was confident that I was making substantial progress in my academic journey and, more importantly, that I was enjoying every moment of it.

It was only after I had almost completed my PhD dissertation that I knew the exact name of my research methodology: post-qualitative inquiry. This approach challenges traditional qualitative methods by rejecting predetermined procedures and fixed humanist assumptions, instead emphasizing openness, flexibility, and relationality (St. Pierre, 2021). Interestingly, my advisor never mentioned this method while I was working on my dissertation. In the interview, she explained, *'I simply did not want to limit you within one method or label but wanted you to freely explore the subject matter. My job as your advisor was to ensure that you were actually learning something and that you were enjoying it. And you were!'*

### **My tribulations**

Despite the thrilling experiences as narrated above, I often experienced feelings of aimlessness and self-doubt during my PhD studies. Without a clear-cut pathway, I spent considerable time figuring things out for myself, and at times felt adrift. Perhaps a bit more specific guidance from my advisor would have made the journey easier. I also worried about my future career. Since my dissertation was not a direct continuation of my previous work in TESOL, I was unsure whether I would be welcomed back into the TESOL community upon returning to Vietnam.

Another challenge lay in my struggle to reconcile the construct of 'learner autonomy' with both critical theory and my CHC heritage. I continually questioned whether I had genuinely transformed or had been absorbed into an academic hegemony that estranged me from my own cultural heritage. This question arose toward the end of my PhD, as I became more familiar with postcolonial theories. However, I never

shared this with my advisor. Over time, as I became an academic advisor myself, I realized that my transformation would not have been possible without her ‘interventions’—her firm refusal to suggest a thesis topic, her insistence on my soul-searching, and especially her distinction between ‘advice’ and ‘order.’ As an academic advisor, I have debated with myself how much direct intervention is necessary for my students, so that their development of autonomy would be possible. Like me, my advisor must have grappled with the paradox that is noted in the literature: while rejecting hierarchical power structures, she still needed to exercise a form of guiding authority to foster her students’ autonomy. Instead of relying on traditional strategies that presume inequality, she used alternative ones, such as silence and waiting. By withholding immediate solutions, she pushed me to articulate my ideas and make my own decisions. As she later explained, *‘Waiting is also an action,’* and *‘Silence could be very powerful.’* What she tried to secure for me was an ‘infrastructure’ for authentic learning and growth, manifesting in her consistent presence and willingness to listen to me without imposing her own agenda.

Finally, as a result of my ‘postmodern’ doctoral journey, I found it difficult to integrate into the ‘modern’ academic world—both during and after my PhD. Writing a post-qualitative dissertation and pursuing a multidisciplinary agenda left me in a liminal space, where I struggled to construct a coherent academic identity and a genuine sense of belonging. For several years after graduation, I dismissed publication as a compliance with the neoliberal ‘publish or perish’ culture. This resistance, however, came at a cost: it delayed my professional visibility and limited my participation in the broader scholarly community.

## After PhD

### Re-integrating into Vietnamese higher education

When I returned to Vietnam in 2017, I realized that while the academic environment here had changed, I had changed much more. At first, the gap between the two seemed difficult to reconcile. I noted this in my journal: *‘I am not sure if I can survive this environment any longer!’* However, I gradually learned to seek small ways to transform it within my capacity. For instance, although I cannot fully reform my university’s assessment regime, I have introduced project-based tasks, portfolios, and peer assessments wherever possible in my classrooms. Emancipatory pedagogy is easier to enact in student supervision—by deliberately narrowing the power gap between myself and my postgraduate students.

Some emancipatory ideas can be powerful in the West but may not make sense in Vietnam. For instance, an emphasis on radical individualism, open critique of authority, or the complete flattening of hierarchical relationships, which are the hallmarks of emancipatory pedagogy, can conflict with traditional values of harmony, respect for elders, and collective identity in my CHC culture. What is seen as “liberating” in the West may be perceived as disrespectful at home. This cultural dissonance challenges educators like me to

critically adapt and re-interpret emancipatory pedagogy in culturally appropriate ways, while ensuring that its core tenets are skillfully enacted.

### **Embracing both heritages strategically**

Both CHC values and emancipatory pedagogy have made up who I am, but they cannot co-exist seamlessly. Over the years, I have come to see myself as an adaptive switch that continually shifts between CHC and emancipatory pedagogy in response to different educational instances and cultural settings. In traditional Vietnamese classrooms, where hierarchy and teacher-centeredness seem more appropriate, I draw upon CHC values such as structured guidance and respectful distance. In other contexts, such as small-group discussions or supervising postgraduate students, I deliberately enact emancipatory principles, such as learner autonomy, critical dialogue, and equal relationships, as informed by Freire and Rancière. Rather than treating these paradigms as mutually exclusive, I navigate between them fluidly, like a bilingual navigating between two languages. This adaptive switching is not a compromise but a form of contextual sensitivity and pedagogical skillfulness—an approach that enables me to remain loyal to the essences of both traditions while responding meaningfully to diverse student needs and institutional realities. My negotiation with them is far from complete, but it is precisely this ongoing movement that makes my academic work both engaging and meaningful.

## **Discussion**

Stuck between two opposing ideologies—CHC and emancipatory pedagogy—I had to figure out ways to move forward with my PhD program and therefore develop my autonomy through a long and turbulent process of negotiation. Such a detailed description of autonomy negotiation and development is unseen in the literature, although several studies have linked doctoral education to identity formation. For instance, Cotterall (2011) argued that doctoral education is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production. In my case, however, autonomy development proved no less significant than the production of new academic knowledge. This present paper also exposes the dynamics of autonomy negotiation, rather than of identity formation.

During this process, my academic advisor's role is undeniable. This finding aligns with Rhouma (2024), who also found that autonomy development among PhD students correlates with their advisors' supervisory styles. However, the present paper also investigates how my advisor's supervisory approach was informed by the critical theory and how it unfolded in alternative, concrete strategies. With her approach, I sometimes found my PhD journey precarious and risky, but strangely enough, this coincided with a remark by Biesta (2016), who argued that it is risks that make education 'beautiful'.

Ultimately, this autoethnography proves that not all postgraduate students are, by definition, autonomous because their sense of autonomy depends significantly on their cultural backgrounds, as proven by my own case. It also points out that pursuing postgraduate studies in a foreign country could be much more demanding than it seems to be. Consequently, it confirms the belief that further studies into the matter should be conducted in the future.

## Conclusion

Development into an independent scholar was perhaps the biggest achievement of my PhD studies—thanks to my ongoing negotiation with my home heritage (CHC) and the emancipatory pedagogy. Interestingly, I learned about emancipatory pedagogy less from books and more from the relationships with my academic advisors, my peers, and the PhD program. The process was neither easy nor risk-free, but it left a lasting imprint—cognitively, emotionally, and even physically—on how I conceptualize myself as a scholar and an academic advisor.

This autoethnography has important implications for different stakeholders, including international PhD students, academic advisors, and program managers. International PhD students may need to be aware of the challenges awaiting them. Like me, they may have to struggle with a new set of values different from their home values. This necessitates their full awareness, constant reflection, and timely adaptation in order to survive the program. Likewise, academic advisors working with international PhD students may need to develop an early awareness of the subtle differences in cultural values and philosophical assumptions between themselves and their advisees. In particular, they must cultivate the art of intervention to ensure that their students receive adequate support but still have space for personal growth. Although there is no fixed formula for effective supervision, an awareness of potential differences may prepare them for any challenges they may encounter during the supervisory process. For program managers, I believe that it is useful to develop an open working regime where transparency is prioritized. Implicit assumptions and expectations may hurt academic relationships at the postgraduate level.

Because this paper is primarily grounded in my lived experiences, which were recalled after nearly a decade, it inevitably includes elements of subjectivity and bias. Such limitations, however, are inherent in autoethnographic research (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016). As a retrospective account, it also tends to foreground positive experiences, while negative ones are not adequately explored. These challenges will be examined in another paper. In the future, I will investigate supervisory practices in Vietnam, particularly how emancipatory pedagogy is enacted in the Vietnamese academic settings and how Vietnamese postgraduate students respond to it.

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