iReflect: An Account of Enacting Reflexivity in Sociocultural Research into Students as iPad-Using Learners

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Abstract

In the context of an ongoing qualitative investigation into the use of iPads as a tool for both epistemological and ontological learning, this article explores how and why I have engaged with researcher reflexivity, demonstrating the philosophical, methodological, and theoretical bases for employing particular reflexive methods. I describe how I have engaged with the field, with participants, and with data based on a philosophical understanding of empirical material not as being neutral and objectively discoverable, but infused with the theories that have shaped my inquiry. The rationale for ribboning my own voice and experience in the written product is explored analytically as well as illustrated through the weaving together of academic discourse and personal narrative. This fusion deliberately blurs the lines between theory, data, and method and readers should be alert to the challenge and paradox of taming the multidimensional messiness of qualitative research into a linear and orderly document.

Keywords: reflexivity, microethnography, methodology, learning technology research, education research

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Introduction

This article offers an account of reflexivity as I am enacting it in ongoing doctoral research into students as iPad-using learners. First, I offer some background to the research project itself—its genesis, purpose, and focus—so that readers may properly locate it within the broader research landscape (Wertsch, 1998) and have a context for the discussion of reflexive methodology enacted. Second, I briefly outline various approaches to reflexivity and describe how and why I have adopted particular strategies. Finally, I consider various challenges I have encountered and describe how I am addressing these challenges.
Research Context

My current research project seeks to understand and describe the ways in which students at the site school are using iPads for learning—understood as both epistemological and ontological in nature—guided by two broad research questions:

1) How and when are iPads used to support learning of curriculum content and processes, and when is such learning regarded as valid or sanctioned by the school?

2) In what ways do iPads contribute to the construction of group and individual identities or particular kinds of selves, and how do these versions of selfhood contribute to student learning?

I describe the project as a reflexive microethnographic investigation of the ways in which iPads support learning of curriculum content and processes, as well as of the device’s contribution to the construction of identities or particular kinds of selves. The research is reflexive because it is philosophically aligned with those thinkers who question the assumption that by following a scientific method a researcher can arrive at a factual conclusion about, and then represent that, reality (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The approach is ethnographic because it explores the meaning of students’ actions, beliefs, and behaviours in relation to the iPad—an emic (insider) rather than an etic (outsider) point of view (Spradley, 1980). More specifically, the research is microethnographic because of its smaller scale: fieldwork was undertaken during one 10-week school term, and the focus is relatively narrow, exploring specific practices associated with a specific technology (DeWalt, 2011; Knoblauch, 2005; Leininger, 1985; Rosenberger, 2001). Data was gathered by taking a reflexive approach to the primary data sources: semi-structured interviews with four participant Year 11 students (two boys and two girls); and observations of these students, their peers, and teachers in various classes. These data sources were supported by reflexive field notes (Elliott, Ryan, & Hollway, 2012; Spradley, 1980).

The rationale for this research is threefold: first, to make a contribution to theory-based qualitative inquiry into learning technology, which has tended to focus more on the pragmatics of learning design than on learning theory (Bennett & Oliver, 2011); second, to contribute to greater cohesion in sociocultural research by employing a family of related sociocultural theories in my theoretical framework, thereby responding to growing concern about the ways in which increased specialisation results in limited interplay between different theoretical approaches (Burke, 1966; Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012; Holland, 1999; Stetsenko, 2008; Wertsch, 1998); and third, to contribute to current scholarly thinking about the nature and role of reflexivity in sociocultural research. These elements are intertwined and some explication of the connectedness between all three is needed if the research is to be properly understood and located, however, the focus of this article is on the third element—reflexivity.

What’s Going On?

The tidy summary of my doctoral research reveals nothing of its shaping forces; nothing of what is going on in the research (Koch & Harrington, 1998). The genesis of this project developed over many years as a result of interplay between numerous influences. I offer the following brief account of those shaping forces, not so that they may be bracketed and thereby achieve objectivity (Oiler, 1982; Thurston, 2010), but so that readers may have a sense of what is going on in terms of the particular social, philosophical, and

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1 The ontological aspects of learning have tended to receive less scholarly attention than the epistemology of learning (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000).
2 All names are pseudonyms.
Like many others, my teaching career spanned a period of time characterised by rapid technological change. As a beginning teacher, I jostled with 12 colleagues to use one of the two desktop computers in our staffroom. I used an overhead projector and chalk, photocopied handouts, walked to my pigeonhole to collect notices twice per day, and coaxed and wheedled to access a computer laboratory. The landscape I left behind to pursue full-time study 13 years later was very different. I reluctantly returned my school-issued tablet, used every day for myriad personal and professional functions. I had accepted without question that I was teaching a generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001) as had the school at which I spent the last four years of my career as Head of Senior English, evident in its no technology is banned philosophy. I had embraced the technological realities of 21st century schooling, working diligently to incorporate technology meaningfully into the English programs for which I was responsible but over time, I had noticed some disconnects.

Students frequently didn’t seem to want to use the technology in the ways I wanted them to use technology. Teaching and learning activities involved a significant amount of information technology, but much high-stakes assessment took place with only a pen and paper. I watched students using laptops and desktop computers and realised that many could not type efficiently enough to capture their thoughts, nor did many know about what I thought were relatively simple word processing functions. I watched my son, whose school had an iPad program, using his self-managed learning device largely to play games and access social media. I began to ask myself questions about learning, teaching, and technology and realised that it was around this issue that I should pursue the doctoral research I had long intended to undertake, and that my son’s school, located in my childhood town, would make an interesting research site.

I had not long commenced my candidature before encountering the concept of researcher reflexivity—taking an ethnographic approach to insider research placed me squarely in reflexivity’s sights (Couture, Saidi, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2012; Deutsch, 1981; Mercer, 2007; Miller & Glassner, 1997). I confess that, initially, I was equivocal. I feared that I might drown out participants’ voices with my own and lose my investigative focus (May & Perry, 2011). I was also cool towards autoethnographic approaches, unconvinced that I could employ these successfully as a reflexive tool and reluctant to limit the appeal of my work to a narrower readership (Newton, Rothlingova, Gutteridge, LeMarchand, & Raphael, 2011). In time, however, I discovered that there is more to being a reflexive researcher than making visible my own identity through self-narrative—perhaps the most widely popularised version of reflexivity (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012)—and that reflexivity is understood and employed in different ways, particularly in qualitative approaches (Day, 2012; Holland, 1999; O'Reilly, 2012). Paradoxically, while this presents something of a challenge because there is no real consensus around what constitutes reflexive research, much less how one actually does reflexivity (O'Reilly, 2012) there are also rich opportunities to explore a fascinating and still-evolving approach to inquiry.

In broad terms, I have understood being reflexive as questioning the assumption that by rigorously adhering to a scientific method of inquiry a researcher can arrive at a factual conclusion about, and then represent that, reality (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The reflexive turn is associated with the rise of postmodern and post-structuralist critiques over the past 40 years, and reflexive research is familiar to most engaged in social scientific inquiry—perhaps so familiar that it is in danger of becoming clichéd. During a recent theory conference, I watched as one panellist rolled her eyes as she spoke about reflexivity. When questioned, she (quickly) explained that her reaction was not intended to be dismissive but reflected the ubiquity of reflexivity in social science research. Indeed, some have questioned whether reflexivity has become a buzzword to which mere lip service is paid, or “the taken-for-granted good of qualitative
research” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 521)—a kind of investigative moral highroad by which one avoids being shamefully labelled “inadequate, incomplete and worst of all, outdated” (May & Perry, 2011, p. 40).

In response, scholars have begun to re-examine reflexive approaches, particularly those in which reflexivity fails to permeate the entire research process (Coffey, 1999) and/or which focus too narrowly on researcher identity (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012). It is argued that for reflexivity to avoid becoming clichéd and irrelevant, current understandings need to be challenged, deepened, and taken beyond identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). What then, might this deepened version of reflexivity—that goes beyond—but does not render obsolete—questions of self and identity look like? Again, paradox—the good news is that many scholars continue to explore these questions, generating a range of interesting perspectives for researchers to explore. The bad news is that incorporating reflexivity is not easy (Newton et al., 2011) because there is no formula. There are, however, more or less appropriate ways of being reflexive depending on our particular research agenda (Day, 2012) and the selection and use of an appropriate approach is an accepted element of high quality qualitative research (Couture et al., 2012). The question of what is appropriate in any given research context continues to be discussed, not so much to prove the value of well established qualitative methods, but to demonstrate that there is a strong relationship between method and the underpinning philosophy of research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Cooper & Burnett, 2006; Newton et al., 2011; O’Reilly, 2012).

Further, the meaning of high quality in the qualitative paradigm continues to dog inquiry (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Koch & Harringon, 1998; Tracy, 2010), but I feel is best described as knowledge contributions that are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). This worth derives from authenticity and trustworthiness: qualitatively generated findings that can be reliably acted upon by practitioners, scholars, leaders, and policy-makers. Such contributions require ongoing interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue about what is needed to ensure inquiry is of a high standard; we must interrogate the goodness of research (Gordon & Patterson, 2013). Reflexivity is widely accepted as an essential element of good qualitative research (Alvesson, 2000; Cooper & Burnett, 2006; Couture et al., 2012; Newton et al., 2011), however, the mere use of the term does not a reflexive researcher make (Newton et al., 2011).

There is a great deal of thoughtful literature that considers the question of what does comprise good qualitative research and how this might be assessed—an exploration of which merits investigation in its own right and is beyond the scope of this article. Tracy (2010) offered a helpful summary of the various perspectives and problems as well as proposing eight “big-tent” criteria, contending that these can be satisfied by qualitative researchers from any tradition “through a variety of craft skills that are flexible depending on the goals of the study and preferences/skills of the researcher” (p. 839). These are useful as a framework for thinking reflexively about research on a number of levels, including the two key levels identified by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000, pp. 5–6): the outward level of careful interpretation and the inward level of reflection. This involves attention to both acting (how I represent myself, mainly to research participants) and writing (how I construct and represent my research, mainly to other researchers) reflexively.

Against this backdrop, and motivated to engage with the question of the role of reflexivity in generating research that is worth paying attention to, I turn now to discussion of two specific approaches I have taken to reflexivity in the context of my ongoing research. In simple terms, this has involved taking a reflexive approach to the established ethnographic data-gathering techniques of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, both in terms of my behaviours (acting reflexively) and in terms of how I have constructed and represented my interpretations in written products (writing reflexively). I also diligently maintained reflexive field notes, finding that this process helped me to both sustain my inner reflexive perspectives, as well as comprising data in its own right as I articulated my interpretations, reinterpreted
my interpretations, and represented my interpretations and reinterpretations. Discussion is limited to reflexive interviews and reflexive field notes in this article.

**Interviews—a reflexive approach**

Interviews have long been used by qualitative researchers to generate data. Traditionally, this data is presented to readers after being packaged into orderly accounts and interpreted by the researcher to draw particular conclusions (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The reflexive turn saw a range of new approaches to interviewing develop, both in terms of conducting them and in interpreting the data generated. In the group and individual interviews I conducted, I enacted reflexivity by adopting a localist approach as distinct from neopositivist or romantic¹ (Alvesson, 2003). The localist approach aligns philosophically and methodologically with this project because it involves scepticism and a desire to explore empirical situations on different levels, based on an understanding that data is infused with the researcher’s particular theoretical, philosophical, political, and ideological perspectives. A localist perspective argues that “people are not reporting external events but producing situated accounts, drawing upon cultural resources in order to produce morally adequate accounts” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 17). This methodological and philosophical approach sits well with the research aim of exploring the ways in which students adopt various identities in relation to the technology because a localist approach to interview data offers an interpretative framework for discussion of these different identities or kinds of selves.

Further, both in acting reflexively and writing reflexively, I have understood interviews as a complex social situation involving interplay between myself and participant students—and between participant students—that bears the imprints of such factors as power relationships, appearance, and gender. I thus needed to be sensitive to the ways in which identities and relationships were formed and managed during the research process (Barge, 2004, p. 71). Conducting a combination of group and individual interviews provided for some interesting interpretative possibilities through an exploration of the ways in which students’ identities shifted in relation to me, one another, and to the technology depending on the particular conversational and contextual dynamics. I felt that taking this approach strengthened the relationship between the project’s philosophy and method, supporting exploration of the research questions in ways that reflect the underpinning theory and philosophical approach.

When preparing for interviews, I drew on Spradley’s (1979) discussion of the three main types of ethnographic question: descriptive, structural, and contrast. I mainly used descriptive questions in the group interview because these are broad and open-ended and designed to capture participants’ talk. However, I did not stick faithfully to previously prepared questions because research is “a practical activity requiring the exercise of judgement in context; it is not a matter of simply following methodological rules” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 23). Instead, I took a conversational approach (Collins, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), seeking to create a relaxed atmosphere in which conversation could range freely, allowing more expansive and incidental ideas to be expressed. At times, students’ comments raised new questions in my mind, and I needed sensitivity when timing my interventions to avoid dominating or shifting the focus too abruptly (Barge, 2004). The students largely directed the conversation, on several occasions even addressing questions and comments to one another. This provided me with rich data from which I could write up various episodes as tableaus exploring the different selves students adopted in relation to the technology and to one another as iPad users. By way of example, consider Catherine’s talk in the following group interview extract:

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¹ Silverman (2011) categorises interviews as positivist, emotionalist or social constructionist and notes that the form of any interview will vary depending on the researcher’s particular orientation.
Catherine: I think like to other schools it’s like, oh they’ve got all this and it’s so good and um yeah I think, well, to me it’s sort of like, oh yeah, cool, but I’d be alright without it? But it is again really good to have it because I put like all my Drama stuff outside of school on it and all my solo music and so I use it a lot for other stuff? . . . I’ve written all my Drama pieces out on my iPad um and then so like whenever I’ve got my iPad I can just read over them and try and learn it (laughs). . . . Well, I don’t have any apps on my iPad, like I don’t even have Pages.

Michael: Wow! (laughs)

Catherine: And like, partly because I can’t work out how to do it (laughs) um but yeah, I don’t feel like it, inhibits my iPad use.

Catherine’s construction of her iPad use appeared somewhat contradictory to me. On one hand, while others might feel admiration for the school’s iPad program, she would “be alright without it”. She went on to emphasise this detachment, stating that she has not downloaded any apps; she doesn’t “even have Pages” (students were instructed by the school to obtain this app). Michael’s interjected “Wow” indicates that he (a highly competent iPad user) finds this unusual. On the other hand, Catherine thought it “really good to have it” because the device offers “anywhere, anytime” learning (Goldman, 2000, p. 1) as she, a talented dancer, juggled school work against a demanding performance schedule. My field journal reflects my attempts to reconcile these two positions:

I found Catherine’s characterisation of her iPad use puzzling—other schools think it is “so good” and “cool” that (site school) has an iPad program, but she’d be “alright without it” . . . but at the same time she seems to actually use the iPad quite extensively in a stereotypically “anywhere, anytime” manner?? It seems a mismatch? Odd that C goes out of her way to express attitudes and behaviours of detachment, while at the same time indicating that she actually uses the iPad fairly extensively as a tool for managing the competing demands of school-based and co-curricular learning obligations. As I listen to the transcript, I wonder whether she is reacting to Michael, perhaps feeling insecure or embarrassed about her relative lack of expertise and trying to balance this against giving me what I want as a researcher. Is this what Alvesson (2003) means by participants’ desire to provide “morally adequate accounts”? (Field journal, 25 May, 2013)

Individual interviews with the four participant students took place five to seven weeks after commencing field work. While still relaxed and conversational in tone with plenty of space for students to speak uninterrupted and steer the direction, and having observed that the ways in which students used the iPad was sometimes markedly different in different contexts, I also posed more specific questions. During observations, I jotted down questions that occurred to me and later refined these prior to the individual interview. I drew on my observations of participant students when considering my own language choices and identity construction during interviews, making choices that I felt would encourage the students to speak freely and direct the conversation. During Catherine’s individual interview, I followed up on the disconnect I had previously perceived and learned that Catherine did not have wireless internet access (wifi) at home and that this was likely to be of analytical significance:
It seems to me that not having wifi was a key factor in C’s construction of her self during the group interview, and it is interesting that she did not reveal this at the time. Instead, it would seem that she adopted a particular user identity as being quite emotionally/philosophically detached from the device, conveying the impression that while she has no apps partly because she doesn’t know how to do it, but equally because she doesn’t feel it is necessary to her learning. When talking one-on-one today, however, I discovered that not having wifi at home is probably the key limiting factor. As I probed, she indicated that if she had wifi at home she would “definitely have heaps more apps”. This is important analytically, I think? In terms of the kind of self/selves C is adopting in relation to the iPad and how/why these shift? I can see a relationship between the pragmatic issues of access/relative expertise and C’s attitude to the iPad; the ontological or “kind of selves” would appear to impact upon C’s epistemological learning, both shaping and being shaped . . . I need to explore this further, I think . . . (Field journal, 11 June, 2013)

I have sought here to offer a brief, pragmatic example of reflexivity being enacted in a way that aligns philosophically with my exploration ‘to interrogating interview talk through a localist understanding of interviews as situated and complex social situations shaped in part by my own participation. The impact of this perspective is captured in the reflexive field notes, which demonstrate the mutually constitutive relationship between my reflexive attitudes and behaviours and the data itself. Reflexive interview strategies (both during the interview itself and in later analysis) support the analytical “bending back” so crucial to reflexive research. This cyclical process involves examining and re-examining interview data, thereby suggesting interesting analytical moments and illuminating the ways in which participants’ voices may be shaped by the researcher, the context, and interpreted data itself. Many other interpretative possibilities also exist. Day (2007) suggested that another reflexive approach would be to go beyond the research relationship by considering how “research participants are variously located within relations of power outside of the immediate interviewing context, as well as the ways in which we as researchers are variously positioned” (p. 67). For example, issues of gender and age, the interplay of self-identified and imposed membership categories, roles played by conversational participants, institutional setting, and so forth. In sum, the process of interpreting my own interpretations and considering the interview as an empirical situation in its own right has offered me a way of linking the epistemology and ontology of my research, yielding not only interesting data but a range of interpretive possibilities.

Reflexive field notes

Writing fieldnotes was central to the reflexive production of knowledge, as was the further reflection involved in working with their contents. . . . They were also a way of accessing the assumptions the researcher was bringing to her analysis, a process of noticing and becoming aware of what otherwise might have been rendered insignificant. (Elliott, et al., 2012, p. 440)

Being systematic about keeping field notes was critical to helping me make visible my own biases and thought patterns, supporting the reflexive process of questioning the political, cultural, and theoretical bases of my interpretations and the ways these affected my understanding of what I observed (Day, 2007). Reflexive field notes, which comprised both notes taken in situ and regular off-site note taking (usually nightly), were a crucial part of my methodological approach—a strategy for engaging in ongoing questioning and problematisation of knowledge production. I offer the following extract¹ from my notes as an example of how writing helped me to articulate my feelings and perspectives. This extract was written

¹ This is an expurgated version. Omitted sections are indicated by an ellipsis.
the evening of an encounter with Tom, a student in the class I had supervised in the unexpected absence of the teacher:

After all these weeks observing other people teaching, two things occurred to me as I lurched through that lesson: firstly that I was talking far too much and secondly, that I wanted to take Tom’s iPad and throw it out the window. . . . I felt greatly discomforted by the irritation the iPad caused me. I had spent weeks observing a range of classroom contexts and I knew that for the most part, students were not often engaged in illicit activity on their iPads during lessons. However, as I tried—thick tongued and wooden—to lead the students through the poems, Tom and the girl next to him barely looked up from his iPad. All my instincts told me that Tom and Jane were not really listening to me; were not really engaged. I was annoyed.

I also felt hamstrung by my identity as a researcher investigating iPad use. I realised that my teacher self was frustrated with Tom’s disengagement. I felt I couldn’t do what I would ordinarily have done—ask him to close the iPad and listen. I felt I had to be tolerant, demonstrating my enlightened attitudes towards technology. . .

Perhaps I was naively enthusiastic about doing some active teaching again after three years of being a homemaker and occasional supply teacher. Perhaps I was just plain stupid for thinking that on . . . the . . . last day of term, students would care about Australian poetry. I know that one difficult lesson is not a reason to dismiss iPads as little more than a disruptive nuisance, but I cannot deny that part of me did that. Nor can I ignore that I found the shift in the interactive dynamic between teacher and students unsettling. Further, I cannot deny that, while I entered this project believing I genuinely had no bias one way or another and continued to believe it was true until this episode, I can only describe the way I felt as an “I knew it” moment, revealing an anti-technology belief that I didn’t even know I held and would have hotly denied if questioned. (Field journal, 21 June, 2013)

Here, reflexive journaling helped me to consider the ways in which my perspectives changed and were coloured by my own experiences. I recognised the tension between the established and familiar pedagogy of a teacher-led lesson and the much less familiar dynamic of learner-guided and technology-mediated pedagogy, resulting in increased awareness of this phenomenon during observations. The cyclical relationship between researcher reflexivity and the data and participants being investigated is apparent here, because this process impacted on the questions I asked during interviews, and influenced my analysis and interpretation of various episodes. I have found reflexive field notes to be an indispensable tool as I have developed my skills; it supports the development of written text that presents the researcher’s interpretations, not as the work of a disembodied intellect (Horsburgh, 2003), but as the view from a particular political, social, cultural, and personal location. The existence of alternative perspectives is acknowledged and dialogue with both self and others is invited by exploring the influences on analysis and alternative interpretations.

Being reflexive about developing the written products of research
The traditional approach to writing ethnography, wherein a neutral observer makes detached generalisations about a particular cultural phenomenon, came under attack during the rise of post-
structuralism in the 1960s (e.g. Said, 1978). *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) captured this shift and subsequent scholars have continued to explore how ethnographic writing can give voice to the other and to what is going on during research. Since the 1980s, three elements in particular have shaped ethnographic writing: firstly, strong reflexivity “which recognises that the ethnographer and his or her language are inevitably a part of the phenomenon that is being investigated” (Spencer, 2001, p. 450); secondly, ethnographers’ accountability for the representation of people’s words and actions in ways that recognise that a single cultural setting embodies complexity and difference rather than neat homogeneity; and thirdly, rather than viewing this accountability as a burden, ethnographers should embrace it as an opportunity.

> It is now possible to write extraordinarily rich, and even sometimes extraordinarily readable, ethnographies which are quite open about their limitations and partiality, and which manage to acknowledge the complexity of the world, and thus the difficulty of rendering it through words on a page, without sacrificing coherence or clarity. (Spencer, 2001, p. 450)

Throughout this article and other written products of the research, I have sought to make my self visible. This is a conscious, textual choice that seeks to acknowledge my role in shaping the contexts being examined, and also seeks to produce a readable document that makes apparent the research limitations as well as my own bias and perspectives. This approach is synergistic with four textual practices identified as contributing to the production of reflexive written texts (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008). Of these (not strictly separate) practices—multi-perspective practices; multi-voicing practices; positioning practices; and destabilising practices—I have chiefly employed the first two in this research.

**Reflexivity as multiperspective practices**

Using multiple perspectives had its inception in the work of those theorists who contended that a fuller understanding of various phenomena could be gained by adopting a multiparadigmatic view (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Holland, 1999; Lewis & Kelemen, 2002; Morgan, 1983; Youngblood Jackson & Mazzei, 2011). In the early months of this project, I encountered the work of those scholars who called for sociocultural theorists to break down the terministic screens (Burke, 1966; Wertsch, 1998) associated with adopting only one or another approach in order to better explore complex and multidimensional issues (Holland, 1999; Stetsenko, 2008; Wertsch, 1998). Such perspectives shaped the direction of this thesis, resulting in the adoption of a family of related sociocultural approaches with a view to both contributing to greater integration between sociocultural approaches as well as to exploring the complex phenomena of iPad-using learners through multiple lenses in order to provide a fuller description of a complex phenomenon. The reflexivity in this project involves the accumulation of different perspectives and the “juxtaposition of perspectives to draw attention to the limitations in using a single frame of reference and, in so doing, provide new insights” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 483).

Using multiple perspectives is not an unproblematic approach, however. For instance, why would using more than one presumably equally flawed perspective provide any greater insight (Alvesson et al., 2008)? Further, in this research project the theories employed are all embedded in separate and vast bodies of literature and I have found grasping all of these in sufficient breadth, depth, and detail a significant and ongoing challenge. Nevertheless, I have found that these challenges are offset by the benefits associated with being forced to look at data through more than one lens. When using this practice, it is impossible to overlook the complex, dynamic, and interactional relationship between data and its interpretation. For example, analysing an episode through the lens of Wertsch’s (1998) 10 elements of mediational means and then again through the lens of Bakhtin’s (1984a, 1984b) dialogism, facilitates a rich interplay of ideas and perspectives. This approach is philosophically aligned with an understanding of postmodern research as untidy and multidimensional, comprising analytical phenomena that can be more fully explored and more
satisfyingly interrogated if the investigator is able to draw on multiple perspectives. In this project, I felt that exploring the epistemological and ontological implications of iPad use demanded more than one theoretical perspective, as the ontology of learning has tended to be implicit rather than explicitly unpacked in scholarly work (Arostegui, 2004; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Using different but related theoretical perspectives supports analysis of both the epistemological and ontological aspects of the learning experience, which are arguably not adequately addressed in any single theoretical approach.

**Reflexivity as multi-voicing practices**

This set of practices draws on the sociological and anthropological debate about the researcher’s authorial identity and his/her relation to the other as research subject (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). Maybin (2001) draws on Bakhtinian theory when exploring the “dynamic multiplicity of voices, genres and social languages” (p. 67) in research texts, seeing these as collectively negotiated between researcher and research participant rather than being the reliable reportage of a neutral and relatively powerful researcher. In this research, the relationship between theory, reflexive philosophy, and methodology is strengthened by using dialogical self theory not only as an analytical tool for unpacking the various kinds of selves adopted by students in relation to the iPad, but also as a strategy for both being critically self-reflective and making myself visible. Further, the inseparable nature of epistemology and ontology—so central to what I was trying to understand and describe in participant students’ learning behaviour—is evident in my research practice through the various multi-voicing practices associated with methodological reflexivity. Alvesson et al. (2008) articulate these practices thus:

1) **The researcher is understood as being as much a participant in the research project as those people who have agreed to be investigated as “subjects”. This is not simply about bringing the self to the field; rather, it is understood that the self is created in the field.**

2) **The researcher declares his or her authorial personality, explicitly presenting details of specific experiences and interests and clearly outlining what authorial choices have been made in presenting the work as having value.**

3) **The researcher uses more creative and experimental writing techniques designed to traverse the space between Self and Other, “revealing both parties as vulnerable, experiencing subjects working to coproduce knowledge.”**

4) **(Tedlock, 2000, p. 467 in Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 484)**

All three of these multi-voicing practices have been deliberately deployed in this project, and throughout this article, I have sought to illustrate some of the ways in which I have used these practices. There is a foundational and explicitly declared philosophical understanding of myself as a being constructed in the field through self-conscious reflexive action in which my life worlds—knowing and being—are entwined. My authorial personality is evident in accounts of factors that have motivated and shaped the project and also, in explicit discussion of the ways in which various interpretations and accounts given have been constructed and represented in particular ways. For example, by adopting a more authoritative and distant tone or by making more considered and reflective language choices when examining the possible interpretations of empirical data. The freedom to employ more creative writing techniques at times—as opposed to intoning with grave authority throughout—has facilitated my desire to recognise and give voice to the other in methodologically systematic and defensible ways while still allowing for interpretative possibilities.
On Challenge and Paradox

Many of the challenges presented by reflexivity have been explored throughout the body of this article, but here I offer a few additional thoughts. First, the mirage of perfect reflexivity; during the early months of research, I submitted some writing prior to my regular supervisory meeting. Feedback included the comment that I had spent too much time describing participant recruitment. However, I had done this deliberately in response to scholarly critique that researchers need to make these processes visible (Newton et al., 2011; Van Maanen, 1988). After some protracted hand wringing, the question was kindly posed, “Do you think you’re trying to be perfectly reflexive?”

This silenced me—the paradox was immediately clear. While reflexivity offers ways of thinking about the quality of research, constructing one’s own research as superior because of a rigorously reflexive approach is a nonsense. In my desire to be meaningfully reflexive and not fall into the buzzword trap, I unwittingly committed those sins for which empiricists and positivists have been criticised: seeking to demonstrate the value of my research through the stringent application of a reflexive method. Thus, I have found that to engage with reflexivity is to accept paradox. As much as one might strive to render one’s self and accompanying biases and perspectives visible, it is not possible to completely eviscerate one’s own research. Further, even if this were possible, the writer cannot exert total control over the ways in which readers interpret and respond to a text; meaning is made by both parties, however adept the writer may be.

In addition to the impossibility of separating oneself from one’s self, any piece of writing is necessarily packaged in a palatable form for consumption by others. To be worthwhile, unavoidably messy research must, unavoidably, be made neat to some extent otherwise it is inaccessible and not worthwhile: word limits must be obeyed; data must be gathered in ways that will stand up to scrutiny; thoughts must have some kind of sequence and order; ideas, however enmeshed, must be disentangled from one another before they can be examined.

Another criticism I encountered on several occasions was that I had drawn on literature from other fields in developing my thinking and approach to reflexivity. There is a great deal of interesting literature around reflexivity in health and nursing research, for instance, where an increasing demand for qualitative research exists alongside the challenge of developing qualitative research that is sufficiently justifiable and meaningful to be of value to global public health practitioners (Reynolds et al., 2011). Additionally, health research exists in an empirical moment not unlike that occupied by education research (Tracy, 2010), and both health and educational practitioners and researchers face comparable ethical dilemmas that flow from similar fiduciary relationships (nurses and patients, teachers and students). Furthermore, researchers in both fields very often occupy similarly dual roles: many teacher-researchers engage in research involving their own students or school of employment, just as many nurse-researchers engage in research involving their own patients and sites of employment. Because one of my research goals was to contribute to increased dialogue between various sociocultural approaches, and because another was to engage in current thinking around reflexivity and its role in generating high-quality qualitative research, I felt using relevant work from fields beyond my own contributed to synergy between my philosophical, theoretical, and methodological approach, but this view is not necessarily shared by others. Thus, another challenge faced by aspiring reflexive researchers is that of making clear, and successfully justifying, reflexive approaches when these may be at odds with accepted strategies of framing scholarly work within particular bodies of literature.

1 Finlay (2002) offers a helpful account of the strengths and weaknesses of various reflexive approaches.
2 Newton et al. (2011) argue that genuine researcher reflexivity involves describing and justifying the use of a recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research.
Other challenges are more pragmatic. Writing reflexively necessarily requires more words and it can be difficult to judge what to include and exclude. This pragmatic issue is connected to the mirage of perfect reflexivity and the impossible task of making what is going on completely visible. In this lies yet another paradox—somehow we must accept that imperfection is unavoidable without allowing ourselves to become defeated. Perhaps this is the greatest challenge of all.

**Conclusion**

My interest in reflexivity has developed alongside my interest in the phenomenon of student iPad use, at times even usurping it in my attentions. I have found that reflexivity evokes a range of responses from outright contempt, to reluctant acceptance, to passionate embrace. I have felt all three and many besides at different times but have come to believe that if I wish to make a scholarly contribution that is interesting, worthwhile, and genuinely engages with reflexivity in meaningful rather than clichéd ways, then I must enact reflexivity in ways that are demonstrably appropriate to my particular research interests. This demands flexibility developed through thoughtfulness and ongoing dialogue with self and others around how to be reflexive and do reflexive research.

I have endeavoured here to not only identify some of the strategies I have employed, but to engage with the spirit of reflexivity by locating my approach within the broader context of my own research as well as the wider research landscape. I have sought to illustrate my reflexive approach using extracts from data and through my written practices in this article, offering the ways I have made sense of the literature with a view to engaging in the ongoing discussion around what reflexivity offers qualitative researchers in an era of creeping empiricism. In so doing, I hope to play a small part in the conversation around the continuing evolution of reflexivity and how this evolution can be enacted in ways that contribute to the generation of high-quality qualitative research.

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