

## A Transcultural Journey: An Ensemble of Canadian, Chinese, and Australian Doctoral Students' Experiences

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*This article is the result of collaboration between three doctoral students from Canada (Gina Ko – University of Calgary), China (Nan Jiao – Beijing Normal University), and Australia (Kristy Corser – Queensland University of Technology) in a 2017 International Doctoral Seminar. The objective of the research was for the students to connect internationally while contributing to academic literature on the transcultural experiences of doctoral students. By using collaborative autoethnography as methodology and transculturalism as the theoretical framework to explore our transcultural journey, we share stories of our experiences. After our shared experiences derived from the formal and informal settings with international academics, five themes emerged. These themes include the desire for students to connect face-to-face and the importance of informal settings to develop students' authentic learning and connection with others. Vulnerability of doctoral students also emerged as a key finding as well as discovering that language barriers posed some challenges. Finally, there was a contrast of academia culture among the three countries. This article has the potential to inform future international seminars to further develop the understanding of doctoral students' transcultural journey.*

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The International Doctoral Seminar (IDS) is a collaboration between Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia, Beijing Normal University (BNU), China, and University of Calgary (UC), Canada. Since 2007, QUT and BNU have had a partnership aligning with QUT's blueprint of fostering linkages with domestic and international partners (QUT, 2014). In 2013, the UC joined the partnership. This extending partnership had the potential to improve the international engagement of researchers through the IDS. Thereafter, it has been hosted by one of the three universities on a rotating basis. The IDS has become an annual international connection among the three universities and often coincides with other academic events. Transnational collaboration is a key vision for the university faculties involved. This includes relationship building between staff and students that result in opportunities in writing collaboratively. This article was a collaboration among three doctoral students across international waters, as a result of attendance at the 2017 IDS hosted by QUT in Brisbane, Australia. The purpose of this research was to understand the transcultural experiences of doctoral students in both informal and formal

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settings, specifically relating to the BNU-UC-QUT doctoral seminar. This work adds to the limited research on transcultural experiences of higher degree research students (Flynn, M., et al., 2016; Mu et al., 2016). We use Slimbach's (2005) transcultural journey to frame the literature review and collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as methodology. The article begins with the context of the seminar, then a literature review of Slimbach's (2005) selected propositions of transcultural journey, followed by the methodology and method, including questions which emerged from our experiences during the doctoral seminar. We then present the findings and discuss the themes. The article concludes with an ensemble of our transcultural journey and recommendations for future higher degree seminar experiences.

### **Context**

In 2017, the week-long doctoral seminar was hosted by QUT in Brisbane, Australia. Three universities' academic staff led the seminar and guided the students from BNU, UC, and QUT in both formal and informal sessions including presentations, workshops, cultural experiences, and mealtimes together. The 2017 seminar focused on research in education, transcultural perspectives, and provided an opportunity for all the doctoral students to present their research to an international audience at QUT's Higher Degree Research (HDR) Conference titled, "Imagine, Inspire, Impact."

After initial connections and discussions during the seminar, we, Gina, from UC, Kristy from QUT, and Nan, from BNU, connected to write this article. This connection happened organically as Gina felt there were common talking points with Kristy and Nan in relation to our personal lives as women and our academic lives as doctoral students. After reflecting on our own experiences during the doctoral seminar, we, as emergent researchers, extended our academic relationship by continuing to collaborate on our thoughts and learning post-seminar.

### **Literature Review**

A salient and shared identity for the three authors was that we were adult learners enrolled in higher education. This identity critically influenced our experience with the seminar. Learning in adulthood (see Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) needs to consider contextual factors as "no person is a total social isolate" (Jarvis, 1987, p. 12). We are relational beings, so we used Slimbach's (2005) transcultural journey as our theoretical framework. Slimbach (2005) noted that transculturalism is "rooted in the quest to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders" (p. 206). He further discussed transcultural competence, a concept which was organized into six categories: perspective consciousness, ethnographic skill, global awareness, world learning, foreign language proficiency, and affective development. These categories speak to the transcultural experience of scholars working together across international borders.

Slimbach also presented 10 organizing propositions about transcultural learning. Among these 10 propositions, we found three of them emerged in this doctoral seminar and guided this article. The first proposition is that "we share a common humanity and transcendent reality with all others" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 208). No matter where we were born, the colour of our skin, or our gender, it is shared humanity that makes it possible for us to make sense of each others' world. The second proposition is about our cultural identity where "we are inescapably marked by the particularities of the circumstances in which we are born and raised" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 210). The environment in which we were born and raised provides the context of our personal stories. The third proposition where, "truth is too big for any single individual or culture to contain" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 212) speaks to the unique worldviews of individuals coming together to co-construct cultural experiences.

Being a part of the transcultural journey, seeking to understand others, and being understood through our shared humanity can entail embracing vulnerability. Brené Brown (2010a), in her foundational TED talk with over 34 million views to date, presented an analysis of the power of vulnerability. Brown (2010a) stated that we are “hardwired” to feel “connected” (para. 3). She voiced the importance of vulnerability as “in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen” (para. 4). According to Brown (2017) we all crave “true belonging and need it to be real” (p. 31). Brown (2010b) conveyed that this can only happen if we can share our imperfect selves with the world. In our autoethnographic correspondences, we argue that vulnerability is needed for Slimbach’s (2005) idea of a transcultural journey where to be open to other cultures, we first need to be open to learning about ourselves, and be open to sharing our own cultural experiences with others. In recent years, international researchers and scholars have used Slimbach’s (2005) transcultural journey to inform their studies including the experience of studying abroad or overseas (Biles & Lindley, 2009; Costello, 2015; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, & Wang, 2009). However, the transcultural journey is not yet rooted in the higher education seminar setting where doctoral students from various countries collaborate to share their experiences and embracing vulnerability.

### **Methodology**

Scholars have written about autoethnography (AE) as combining autobiography within social contexts (Chang et al., 2013; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Hence, AE is “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. 2). We used collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as methodology because CAE is a “qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 17). The benefits of CAE include: “(1) collective exploration of researcher subjectivity; (2) power-sharing among researcher-participants; (3) efficiency and enrichment in the research process; (4) deeper learning about the self and others; and (5) community building” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 25). We selected CAE so that we can share our storied experiences together in personal and cultural ways. More recently, scholars have used CAE in their studies: to share three foreign-born female faculty of color’s experiences (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang, 2014); to explore leaders of color and their mentoring in higher education (Chang, Longman, & Franco, 2014); and to present ethics of writing and intensity (Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2013). These works, among others, exemplify that international scholars are embracing CAE as a methodology. Chang and colleagues (2013) compared CAE with musical compositions where AE is akin to a “solo performance” and CAE is much like an “ensemble.” By the end of this article, we aim to compose a storied ensemble of our transcultural journey (Slimbach, 2005).

### **Method**

After returning to our respective countries post-seminar, Gina reached out to Nan and Kristy to propose the collaboration on an article for a special issue in a graduate-student led journal in the Werklund School of Education. Based on the shared experience of being adult learners, we composed three questions through email for exploration: (1) Describe your transcultural experience of the doctoral seminar in formal and informal settings; (2) What are some moments during the doctoral seminar that stood out for you in your interaction with the other two authors?; and, (3) How has this experience shifted your thinking or transformed your learning?

Each of us provided electronic responses to the three questions and all the conversations shared comprised the raw data. We then engaged in a back and forth conversation where we each read one others' responses. We deciphered key words and phrases by reading and comparing responses to the questions. During this process, we uncovered themes, and each of us further engaged in the reflective process by contributing our understanding to the questions.

### **Research Participants**

At the time of writing this article, Gina was a doctoral candidate specializing in educational leadership at the University of Calgary, Werklund School of Education. She had a teaching and counselling background and her research pertained to working with immigrant and refugee youth in a photovoice project to share their leadership stories and experiences. Gina taught for the Bachelor of Education program at the University of Calgary and for the Master of Counselling program with Athabasca University. She was also a registered psychologist at a non-profit organization where she worked with clients using the single-session model at no cost to clients. Gina had published in the areas of immigrant students developing social confidence in high school and reviewed a book about brief coaching with children and young people.

Nan was a third-year doctoral candidate specializing in educational management in the Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University. She completed her master's degree at Glasgow University and it pertained to TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language). Her studies continued to focus on teachers' problems, particularly on rural teachers' turnover. Nan had contributed to several research projects and they related to school improvement, high-quality teacher training, and curriculum building. She had previously published in the areas of rural teachers and educational policy.

Kristy was a doctoral student from Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. Kristy's research was in cloud computing in the primary school classroom, specifically looking at digital ecosystems, policy, and the teaching and learning associated with cloud platforms. She was interested in the implications of policy on teaching and learning as well as the affordances of cloud computing on innovative and new ways of teaching and learning. Using Actor Network Theory and Communities of Practice, Kristy's research explored the networks within a bounded case study with teachers and students as participants. Kristy's research used this theoretical framework that gives equal agency to human and non-human actors that create assemblages within the existing and new network. She was also a registered teacher within Education Queensland and was working with teachers to integrate meaningful and purposeful technology into pedagogy.

In addition to the diversity of our academic history, our personal circumstances had similarities and differences. We were all cisgender, heterosexual women pursuing doctoral degrees. There were generational differences among us three ranging in age from early 20s to early 40s. Gina and Kristy were married and had children. Nan, the youngest of us, was single. Kristy was studying part time, while Gina and Nan were full-time students. Gina and Nan are Chinese, and Kristy is Caucasian. Even though Gina is Chinese, she came to Canada as a refugee from Vietnam at a young age. Nan grew up in China and Kristy in Australia. It is important to contextualize the similarities and differences amongst us to demonstrate that despite the vast difference, we shared a common experience. This common experience enabled us to collaborate from different parts of the globe because of the connections we made during the IDS.

## Findings

In this section, we share the findings of the five themes that emerged from our conversations about our shared experience with the seminar. The themes were as follows: 1) there is a desire to connect face-to-face with graduate students from different universities to learn from/with one another; 2) the informal outings helped cultivate a sense of connection and authentic learning; 3) moments of vulnerability were embraced; 4) English as the primary language of communication can pose some challenges; and 5) there is a contrast of academia culture among the three countries; the doctoral seminar is a bridge connecting the various ways of learning.

### **Theme 1: There is a desire to connect face-to-face with graduate students from different universities and learn from/with one another**

We craved connection with one another as each described the excitement of being selected to attend the IDS. This theme showcased the enthusiasm that permeated throughout the transcultural journey (Slimbach, 2005) and beyond.

#### **Gina**

When I heard the news that I was one of four students selected to participate in the International Doctoral Seminar, I knew this would be a life changing experience due to my excitement to learn about other cultures and connect with students from many walks of life. Not only is Brisbane beautiful, I had the chance to talk to Australian and Chinese students about their research and their experiences of graduate school. No reading from a book or article can replace this authentic learning.

#### **Nan**

I always knew there would be a chance for me to go to another country and communicate thoroughly with doctoral students with different academic backgrounds. Therefore, when I first saw the information on my faculty's web page, I sent my application without any hesitation. Luckily, I was given the opportunity, and I knew I would join an academic feast. I started to get ready academically and mentally. My mom even specifically called me and told me that I should wear something formal and treat the presentation seriously. "Of course, I will!"

#### **Kristy**

Being a part-time external student, I take any opportunity to connect face to face with my research peers. I was delighted to be selected to help host the BNU-QUT-UC doctoral seminar at Kelvin Grove in October 2017. Knowing first hand the feeling of our visitors arriving to Brisbane after their long flights, I was excited to meet and greet our Canadian visitors at the airport and our Chinese visitors in the hotel lobby the next morning. This is where the relationships and connections were first formed in person and continued to develop throughout the doctoral seminar. I made the effort to sit next to different people throughout the seminar, initiate conversation, and get to know my colleagues. I enjoyed learning Chinese words from the students from BNU, although learning how to order a cold beer was out of the context of the seminar.

### **Debrief of Theme 1**

Here, it is apparent this gathering of graduate minds was welcomed by each participant. The desire for connection (Brown, 2017) cannot be replaced by classroom and textbook learning (Jarvis, 1987). The sharing through face-to-face conversations had us learn about one another's story and context (Jarvis, 1987; Slimbach, 2005). The desire for connection assisted us to leave

our comfort zone and be curious about others' lived experience, which is an integral part of graduate school and Slimbach's (2005) proposition one of common humanity.

### **Theme 2: The informal outings helped cultivate a sense of connection and authentic learning**

Beyond the welcomed gathering of minds in theme one, in theme two, we spoke of the appreciation for informal opportunities to connect outside of the formal academic activities and conference; hence, the concept of authentic learning whereby learning mirrors the "complexities and ambiguities of real life" (Peace, 2016, para. 3). There was a collaborative feeling of connecting as human beings, beyond the status of doctoral students.

#### **Gina**

I was pleased with the informal opportunities to get to know the other participants, such as a school visit led by Kristy. We also went to a koala sanctuary, a protected rainforest, a beach, and ate together in many restaurants. Even typing this now, I appreciate the learning while immersed in these activities. I can feel the warm sun on my face and the pleasant wind blowing through my hair. I took many photographs that remind me of these special experiences. I would sit beside someone different on the bus or a restaurant, so I could learn more about their lived experience as students, in some cases mothers, and as humans connecting through our shared humanity.

#### **Nan**

We had a Halloween dinner at one local family's house and made our own masks. We also got a chance to visit a local school with Kristy's guidance and joined several classrooms; a rare opportunity. We went to the beach and felt the wind on the seashore, and we had a rainforest walk to experience the sustainability and gift of Aboriginal peoples, in person. I love animals, and even now I can remember the touch and smell when I was holding a koala at the Koala Sanctuary. After all these wonderful experiences, what I cherished most is how complete this seminar was, and the hospitality of the QUT staff.

#### **Kristy**

Along with the formal academic arrangements of the doctoral seminar, there were plenty of opportunities to build relationships with my doctoral colleagues in informal settings. There were many hours spent on the bus travelling to and from outings where we had the chance to get to know our peers. I enjoyed wandering around the Montville Maleny shopping strip and discussing local resources. Having international visitors to my home city made me realize that I take for granted what is around me. This was particularly made evident when some Canadian students were amazed by Brisbane's jacaranda trees, something that I see everyday, but do not take the time to stop and appreciate the natural wonders of my home town.

### ***Debrief of Theme 2***

The informal outings gave us a chance to cultivate relationships outside of the academic environment. This allowed us to share our own cultural background while learning about another's through the transcultural journey (Slimbach, 2005). These informal learning opportunities had us appreciate one another's sociocultural context (Jarvis, 1987), whether as a host or visitors in Brisbane. As doctoral students, we found that informal learning cultivated a stronger bond and

deeper understanding of one another's lived experience. Therefore, we encourage graduate students to take opportunities to learn with their peers outside of the institution.

### **Theme 3: We embraced moments of vulnerability**

The third theme encompasses openness and vulnerability. We all appreciated the shared experiences of vulnerability when they appeared in various moments. We agreed that vulnerability is needed and welcomed in order to be connected at a deeper human level.

#### **Gina**

The memory that speaks to me is when Kristy and I talked about vulnerability. At the beginning of the seminar, I shared that as doctoral students, we need to feel safe to be vulnerable by asking questions, seeking out help when needed, and not be defeated by experiences of failure. These are so important in order to persist in the face of challenges. At the end of the seminar, Kristy and I sat down, and she noted that my view about vulnerability speaks to her. She agreed that it is important to be open and vulnerable in order to seek connection. I shared my appreciation for Brené Brown, her TED talk about vulnerability (2010a) and her book, *Daring Greatly* (2015). She said she would look into them. Kristy shared that she tries her best to model vulnerability with her children.

#### **Nan**

Every time I saw Gina, she was always excited and interested in what other people were talking about, and this happened when we communicated. She is a woman who can make other people feel good about themselves. I remember she talked about how her family got to Canada, and what her childhood was like in a refugee camp. She mentioned when she was a young girl, she and her classmates all brought lunch to school, and her mother would put Chinese food in her lunch box, but she always felt embarrassed because she didn't want to be different; she wanted to eat sandwiches like other students. I felt her vulnerability when I heard these stories. For a young girl, with a foreigner's face, accent, and foreign food, all these defined who she was, and each difference between her and her classmates could make her feel self-doubt. Gina herself is an answer to a transcultural experience. It is a great thing that she was willing to talk about herself and her family with an open heart, because what she felt and experienced is unique and can not be imagined by most of us.

#### **Kristy**

During one of the getting-to-know-you activities during the doctoral seminar, Gina, Nan and myself discussed vulnerability. Between us, we shared our vulnerabilities associated with being doctoral students. In my other life experiences including working within the education department and being a parent, I do not feel as vulnerable as I do with the idea of myself being a doctoral student. Studying at this level is out of my comfort zone, and therefore, I am most vulnerable as a student. I felt a connection with my doctoral colleagues despite our varied study topics, and different homes from other parts of the globe. Someone once said to me, when you are the person in the room that knows the most, it is time to move rooms. I am in that new room where I am most vulnerable, feel like I know the least and willing to learn, take on critical feedback and grow as a writer. I became vulnerable when I presented my research at the QUT conference during our doctoral seminar. I presented to my doctoral peers as well as academics from QUT, BNU and UC. My vulnerabilities are quickly eased when my colleagues are encouraging of

my research. It is exciting when others want to hear about your research as you do not often get a chance to talk about it.

### **Debrief of Theme 3**

The theme of vulnerability allowed each of us to realize we are not perfect and that is okay (Brown, 2010b). Graduate school can be challenging in that we want to belong (Brown, 2015, 2017), yet the desire to belong can be met with obstacles when one fails to meet certain expectations as adult learners (Merriam et al., 2007). This transcultural journey (Slimbach, 2005) has taught us that being vulnerable has opened many opportunities to really be seen (Brown, 2017). To be seen means it is acceptable to not be perfect, and failure is as much a part of the journey as success.

### **Theme 4: English as the primary language of communication can pose some challenges.**

Another theme pertains to the pragmatics of international collaborations; namely, use of language. Throughout the seminar, there were points of tension with language because English was used as the dominant and main language, which posed challenges for those with English as an additional language.

#### **Gina**

English is my second language as I grew up speaking Cantonese at home. Presently, I am more fluent in English as I was immersed in it since elementary school. However, I often think in Cantonese and am learning Mandarin. There are many words that cannot be translated directly from one language to another. Therefore, I can see how it can be challenging if I had to present my research in another language that is not natural for me. I think it is courageous for those who do. It shows that they are willing to take risks in order to learn and thrive in spite of challenges.

#### **Nan**

We have to admit that language is always a problem for us to participate in such international conferences, and it is a bit of a struggle for us to understand and make other people understand during the process of speaking the English language. This is especially the case for academic communication as it is not like daily communication, which is mostly about information exchange. Academic communication is more about expressing deep-thinking ideas, so there are mainly two kinds of problems: first, you pursue thorough thinking, but due to language limitations you can not express your idea well; second, you think with the second language so that you can express all of your ideas but due to the language limitation you can not even think thoroughly. This is a sad situation for English as a Second Language (ESL) people for sure, but if we see the bright side, we are forced to improve our English and become bilingual speakers. This is an asset as bilinguals have strengths such as cultural awareness and cognitive flexibility.

#### **Kristy**

English is my first and only language, however I do try and embrace the local language when I am exposed to other cultures and contexts. I enjoyed attempting to learn some Chinese phrases while I was participating in the 2017 doctoral seminar and when travelling for leisure, I attempt to speak the native language, which I can see locals appreciate. Academic research in your first language is difficult enough. Given the complexity of this style of writing, I can therefore appreciate how difficult it must be for my colleagues to present their academic research in their second language. I praise the efforts of all the ESL students, who participated in this seminar.

### **Debrief of Theme 4**

Many students were bilingual, including two authors of this article, however formal sessions during the seminar were conducted in English, as this was the common language used by the doctoral students in attendance. Students from BNU were expected to have a certain level of English, and Gina and Kristy could only imagine how challenging that might have been. This speaks to Slimbach's (2005) proposition two where we are "inescapably marked by the particularities of the circumstances in which we are born and raised" (p. 210), and it seems each of us are cognizant of how language can advantage or disadvantage participants of this seminar. This knowledge is significant due to the growth of international students studying across borders and sensitivities to linguistic privilege become central to honour various voices (Mu et al., 2016).

### **Theme 5: There is diversity within the academic cultures of the three countries; The doctoral seminar is a bridge connecting the various ways of learning.**

We each grew up in different countries and we explored the differences in academic culture throughout the seminar. There were contrasts between predominantly mono-cultural (China) and multicultural (Australia and Canada) countries.

#### **Gina**

I was born in Vietnam, of Chinese ancestry, and my family escaped Vietnam when I was two years old due to the communist government having taken over South Vietnam. Canada is a diverse country, but as a refugee child and being raised Chinese, I would say that my home environment has resembled a mono-cultural way of life. For example, my aunts who raised me have traditional beliefs in that a woman should be subservient to her husband, have children, take care of the house as well as work outside the home. However, being educated in Canada, I have learned that a woman does not have to do it all, especially at home, and that we are continually working towards equality. With these lived experiences, throughout the seminar, I have noticed the difference in how doctoral students from each university are navigating their research journeys. It seems QUT students are not required to take specific courses before beginning their dissertation, and BNU students are often being told by their supervisors what to focus on. For myself, there were required courses and for the most part I was free to choose what I want to research, with ongoing conversations and guidance from my supervisor.

#### **Nan**

I think China's academia is relatively mono-cultural due to two reasons: first, the Chinese academic circle is mainly composed of Chinese academics and tend to lack cultural-diversity; and second, Chinese is the common language which is used widely in the Chinese academic circle. We have to admit that English is the main language in the whole world and most academic environments, and from this point, it is undeniable that BNU students may gain the most from the seminar than students from the two other universities. At least we have the opportunity to improve our English. Therefore, for us Chinese, participating in an international conference is more than sharing knowledge, it allows us to be open to the different academic circles of different countries. Take this article, for example, the layout and way of writing could be very different in China, and during the process of making this article a whole, I feel like I am part of the international academic circle. Although I did my master's degree in the United Kingdom, it has been a different experience compared to this collaborative writing. Maybe that is because I had been taught in the British way

and the work I had produced was naturally British, but now I am writing this article as a Chinese academic in a mix-cultural academic workshop. Therefore, I feel like what the doctoral seminar brought me is the chance to collaborate with academics from other countries, which makes me step out of the mono-cultural academic circle and integrate the international academic environment.

### **Kristy**

I grew up in a multicultural neighbourhood and my multicultural experiences have grown as I have moved into my adulthood life. My academic experience at QUT has also been multicultural. QUT has given me the opportunity to grow academically through participation in the doctoral seminars. I have gained professional relationships, had the opportunity to plan and organize a seminar, and learned about experiences of other doctoral students. I have gained understanding that Chinese students are guided more closely by their supervisors regarding research questions and areas, UC students are not being federally or state (province) funded to complete their doctorate, and at QUT, a doctorate is paid for by the federal government and students have open choice on research topics and questions. Chinese students do not tend to work in the profession before doing a doctorate, whereas in Australia, typically a doctorate student in education has worked as a teacher or similar, making doctoral students older than Chinese students. Despite our differences, we have a similar interest in education, and like any doctorate hope to make a difference for the better.

### ***Debrief of Theme 5***

It is evident that each of our countries have had us socialized in education and academia differently. Despite these differences, the various worldviews (Slimbach, 2005) have made us curious about one another. This curiosity can be a powerful strive towards belonging (Brown, 2015, 2017). As such, belonging is a vital part of doctoral students' identity where the road to convocation can entail uncertainty, self-doubt, and even trials of failures and successes.

In summary, the above five themes speak to each of our unique experiences of the transcultural journey, particularly Slimbach's (2005) first three propositions. The first proposition is that we share a "common humanity" in that our human connection and intersecting cultural identities have had us cultivate a strong academic bond to write this article together (Slimbach, 2005, p. 208). The second is "the particularities of the circumstances in which we were born and raised" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 212) were discussed with vulnerability (Brown, 2010a) to create the ensemble of stories (Chang et al., 2013). The third proposition is that the co-construction of the ensemble is not about a single truth (Slimbach, 2005), rather it is a sharing of our imperfect selves with the world to invite further connection (Brown, 2010b).

### **Discussion**

This meeting in Brisbane, Australia had the three of us come to realize that, despite some cultural differences, we all are conducting research to the betterment of the field of education. We share a common humanity in this aim (Slimbach, 2005). It is our shared humanity to experience, imagine, and appreciate the relationships we have cultivated throughout this seminar. We are passionate about research and how it may influence practice and policy. The doctoral seminar offered the chance for students who have the desire to connect, which was a key finding from the research. That is, it would be beneficial for the universities involved to continue the doctoral seminar to allow their students to connect and experience authentic learning. As Slimbach (2005)

shared,” social locations profoundly shape our sense of self” (p. 210); we all have our own story, and it is this transcultural (Slimbach, 2005) doctoral seminar that has brought us together to discover how our stories can be a part of an ensemble (Chang et al., 2013) of moment-in-time stories of each of our lives. The social locations (Jarvis, 1987) of being raised in different countries make us unique (Slimbach, 2005). Factors such as the intersections of our gender, age, race, class, nationality, and ethnicity are important as they make us individuals and part of an international learning community.

Further, our ability to be open and vulnerable (Brown, 2010a, 2017) as our personal and academic relationships developed throughout the week can help us confront our own biases and assumptions about another’s culture or worldview (Slimbach, 2005). Although the seminar only lasted for one week, the short time did not detract from what we have learned as individuals and as a doctoral seminar cohort. Even though we wrote this article from three countries half an earth distance away, with time differences, internet interruptions, language obstacles, and diverse academic practices, we have paid attention to our similarities and this transcultural journey helped give “birth to a new self” (Slimbach, 2005, p. 222).

During this collaboration, we continued to transmit knowledge and culture, which will make us “a whole new us” as the journey is ongoing with the three of us looking to work together in future academic endeavours. We left the old self behind and see a new version emerging from wide witnesses and readings. Moreover, it is important to point out that the main point of being in a transcultural journey (Slimbach, 2005) is to embrace other people’s cultures and let them in. This can be embraced by the willingness to be vulnerable (Brown, 2017). As Kristy shared, for us three authors, we have built on what and who we were before doing a doctorate, before the doctoral seminar. For Kristy, this latest seminar has built on her transcultural knowledge rather than forming it, as she has been a past participant of the seminar and believes her life experience has contributed to her transcultural knowledge.

This seminar was unique in that it has placed this transcultural knowledge in the academic space, which is fundamental to new learning. We have all “let each other in” our academic, vulnerable, and transcultural spaces. This article is one of the formative productions of the doctoral seminar; the collaboration has been rich; this piece of writing is the beginning of our lifelong friendship; and this transcultural experience is a drop of water in the sea of international academic communication which will push the academic development forward.

### **Limitations and the Future Directions**

This small-scale collaborative autoethnography (CAE) looked at the transcultural journey of three participants of the 2017 doctoral seminar. The analysis of the participants experiences in combination with Slimbach’s (2005) transcultural journey provided an in-depth exploration of the themes that emerged. Due to the qualitative nature of this work, it is not meant to be generalized to a larger population. We remained transparent and ethical throughout the research period. That is, we were open and honest with each other and willing participants in the research. There was a “genuine interest” in one another’s lives and “respect for diversity” (Slimbach, 2005, p. 213) throughout this collaboration. We presented insights and conclusions that are true to the data which in turn have contributed to trustworthiness and the gap in academic research on transcultural experiences of doctoral students. Adequate engagement in data collection took place based on the informal face-to-face discussions during the seminar as well as many electronic communications post-seminar. This engagement is another form of trustworthiness (Merriam, 2014). Furthermore, writing this article in English could be seen as a limitation given that English

is not the first language for two of us authors. We agreed that authors' academic English proficiency was appropriate for this research collaboration, an outcome which fulfills one of the broad goals of the doctoral seminar. One future direction is to translate and publish this article in Chinese and this would be a new experience for Gina and Kristy.

### Conclusion

This article was the result of collaboration across international borders, from three different countries, despite restrictions on accessibility to certain online platforms. The collaborations between BNU, UC, and QUT, in particular, the International Doctoral Seminars, continue to offer doctoral students from the three universities a transcultural experience that is unique, diverse, and dynamic. The article contributes to the aim of the doctoral seminar, which is to strengthen the academic growth of doctoral students. We were also given the opportunity to present our own research to an academic audience during the Education Higher Degree Research Conference that took place at QUT during the IDS.

The themes of desire to connect, authentic learning, vulnerability, language, and academic spaces can inform other international seminars in higher education to consider the intricacies of such a transcultural journey. Both formal and informal experiences of the IDS were rewarding and contributed to our transcultural journey together. Our partnership has also contributed to suppressing the challenges that were evident in this research, such as language and distance. As outlined throughout this article, we have thought, grown, and shifted in our transcultural journey throughout the IDS experience. The potential growth that the IDS has on doctoral students connecting and collaborating will contribute to the academic research on the importance of transcultural experiences in higher education.

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