

HALFWAY DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CRITIQUE OF AI IN LIFELONG LEARNING

Sarah FRODSHAM

Julie BOURGUIGNON

University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Email: sarah.frodsham@conted.ox.ac

Research Paper

Keywords: GenAI; higher education; collaborative autoethnography; ontology; epistemic insights

ABSTRACT

This paper responds to UNESCO's call for the ethical and pedagogical validation of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Situated within the University of Oxford's free provision of ChatGPT-5.2, the study examines how GenAI can, within a bounded educational setting, shape agency. We draw on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to frame engagement with GenAI as the first author initially explores an unfamiliar learning landscape. The analysis of this digital exploration is structured around four dimensions of agency: independent, social interaction, demonstrable action, and complex. It also centres on a reflective collaborative autoethnographic review of the first author's interpretation of A. A. Milne's poem *Halfway Down* across multiple lenses (child, scientist, social scientist, and artist), which is also juxtaposed alongside GenAI-generated interpretations on the same poem, through the same lenses. This research was designed to answer the question 'How does social context shape the adoption of generative AI in higher education, particularly within the agentic learning process?' Findings indicate that while GenAI produces extensive and coherent text, it lacks personalisation, referencing, and socially mediated dialogue. The absence of a human "more able other" highlights the limitations of AI in replicating the social and cultural dimensions central to education. Reflexive dialogue between the authors further reveals the importance of structured, collaborative engagement in sustaining learner agency. Ultimately, the paper argues that GenAI should be an augmentation rather than replacement for human-centred teaching and that its effective integration into Higher Education requires careful pedagogical design grounded in reflexivity, social interaction, structured tasks and the tenets of learner agency.

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Generative AI (GenAI) is a Large Language Model, pre-trained on even larger amounts of data. It espouses answers to any questions and generates text that mimics the nuances of written discourse. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) guidance "stresses the need for educational institutions to validate GenAI systems on their ethical and pedagogical appropriateness for education" (UNESCO, 2023). With this in mind, Oxford University (2025) have openly welcomed the transformative potential of this cutting-edge technology by being the first United Kingdom university to provide free ChatGPT-5.2 model licences to both staff and students.

MacDonald (2025) discussed this free offering at the [eucen](#) Autumn Seminar at the University of Barcelona, Spain, and described the work of the Department of Oxford Lifelong Learning in trialling new AI tools to enhance adult education. At the same conference, Heintz (2025) suggested that the future of education could be ‘on-demand education creation’ and even proposed that, ultimately, skills could be instantly implanted by streaming pre-programmed data into the brain through a neural jack, akin to the Hollywood movie ‘The Matrix’. This imagery, however, reduces knowledge to a one-way data exchange and fails to address how it meets aspiring academics’ independent learning needs. That is, Jarvis (2014) argues, it would overlook the opportunity for critical reflection, what the lifelong learner contributes to the social context, and omit the importance of developing learning relationship between student and teacher. To consider this further, the first author, who is also a lifelong learner and lecturer at Oxford Lifelong Learning, reflected on her lived experience of adopting GenAI. She did this while positioning this alongside the fictional narrative ‘Alice in Wonderland’. This approach is not without precedent. Spiro (2014), for example, demonstrates how both fictional and non-fictional accounts can shape the future practices of those who facilitate learning. The paper initially adopts an autoethnographic approach, followed by a collaborative autoethnographic perspective. By engaging with this established methodological tradition on her own first, the fiction becomes a reflective mirror, illuminating the intersections between personal experience and imagined worlds. However, in the spirit of recognising multiple and complex perspectives, both authors will bring their collective thoughts to the foreground while reflecting on the first author’s interactions with GenAI. Julie’s additional perspective of Sarah’s storied account will ensure that the research remains socially and culturally grounded and creates the potential opportunity for collaborative change beyond a singular narrative (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Although the aforementioned film is not directly based on Alice in Wonderland, it draws inspiration from Lewis Carroll’s classic story. It is through this fictional tale that this reflective inquiry will begin to unfold.

Sarah was offered the opportunity through the University of Oxford to either download the free AI application (app) or remain ignorant of the affordances it could offer. She opted to install the software and thus this new tool became the focus of new learning opportunities (Milne, 2011). Initially, her interactions stimulated awe-inspiring wonder as she played with the app, but she also recognised that further understanding would require deeper level cognitive engagement. Therefore, she acknowledged that she had to do more than simply idly ask general knowledge questions and look on in wonder as text seemingly appeared. This is contrasted to the fictional character Alice, in her adventures in Wonderland, because she had neither an app nor a conversational companion to support her during the initial stages of her journey, but she interacted with the characters she met along the way to help her learn about her surroundings. For example, upon seeing the Cheshire cat, she asked for directions

“Cheshire Puss,” she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. “Come, it’s pleased so far,” thought Alice, and she went on. “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.” (Carroll, 1869).

Placed into an educational context, it could be argued that prior to this social interaction between cat and protagonist, Alice was a ‘lone scientist,’ or a constructivist learner (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). This is similar to Sarah’s initial exploration of adopting AI. More

specifically, she was discovering Wonderland for herself, but the conversation and the cat questioning her destination, or objective, reinforces Bruner and Haste's (1987) summation that it is through social interactions with a more experienced other that students can 'become' more knowledgeable about their world in which they are situated. This space between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from others was defined by Vygotsky (1978, p.: 86) as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). McGregor (2008) would also argue that it is how tasks are structured by the other that is key to fruitful outcomes. She found that in an educational environment, an 'open task' generated ideas, but with little application, while partially structured ones produced more collaborative and evaluated strategies. Clay (2025, p. 2) argued that teachers, or Vygotsky's other, should support learners in adopting the helpful uses of AI as a tool, while avoiding the harmful pitfalls, with the ultimate aim of strengthening learner agency. Yet Clay also acknowledges that '*our problem is that we don't know how to do that*' (ibid). Nevertheless, UNESCO (2023) is still calling for GenAI to be adopted for educational purposes to facilitate 'agency' or independent learning.

To scrutinise Sarah's agentic AI learning journey further in this paper we are adopting Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019, p. 223) definition of *agency*, that is, '*the capacity to act independently and to make one's choices.*' However, Biesta and Tedder (2007) stated that agency cannot be possessed and should be augmented through participatory engagement. This is *learner agency*, whereby students are provided with opportunities by another to make decisions and act upon them (Bruner, 1996). In turn, the student *demonstrates agency* and actively engages in ways in which they show initiative (Mercer, 2012). There is a fourth dimension to consider here too, namely *complex agency*, which emerges differently across contexts, through various interactions with others, and over time (Mercer, 2012).

In this paper, therefore, we will consider Sarah's initial explorations of AI in her personal Wonderland through these four dimensions of agency. By adopting this framework, the study seeks to deepen pedagogical understanding and address the following research question: How does social context shape the adoption of generative AI in higher education, particularly within the agentic learning process?

In responding to this question, the paper presents a collaborative autoethnographic account that explores how generative AI may or may not facilitate learner agency, particularly through social context. It offers both reflective and conceptual insights, providing perspectives relevant to practitioners, digital pedagogy professionals, and researchers interested in AI in education.

To consider this further let's turn back to the Cheshire cat, in the excerpt above, who exemplifies learner agency by situating themselves as the social other when asking about Alice's destination. This actively engages Alice's demonstrable agency and she asks her next question of the cat, which is not found in the excerpt above. She asks "*What sort of people live about here?*" (Carroll, 1869). She is informed "*In **that** direction... lives a Hatter: and in **that** direction... lives a March Hare. Visit either if you like: they're both mad.*" After further conversation, Alice makes her own agentic choice about which way to go because "*I've seen hatters before... the March Hare will be the most interesting.*" Metaphorically, she is continuing to discover and experience something anew. What this reified interaction between cat and protagonist does not exemplify is the emergence of complex agency, for it is a singular conversation, situated in an atomised context. For the fourth dimension to emerge during Sarah's GenAI journey it would need to be longitudinal, historical and reflective in nature. It is also interesting to note that at this juncture in the story Alice was interacting with the Cheshire cat whilst Sarah continued to opt for the adoption of a constructivist approach, namely, the discovery of GenAI by herself, before inviting conversation with another.

METHODOLOGICAL STANCE: INTO COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Sarah began her journey down the metaphorical rabbit hole with her phone in hand and the app at her fingertips, whereas Alice, in Lewis Carroll's book, is introduced to the reader as sitting by the riverbank next to her sister, contemplating whether or not to make a daisy chain. While this initial scene is brief, it is required to understand context. Namely, Alice is a young girl situated in her own ontological reality. This is the environment in which she sees the white rabbit who is the initial foil for future epistemic insights. Sarah's background context is different; she was a former biochemist of 10 years and then traversed the social science paradigm to obtain her doctorate in education and more recently obtained a Master's in Art practice; thus, she can claim to view her interactions with AI not from a singular paradigm, but through multiple perspectives. She is also the co-convenor of the AI Steering Group at Oxford Lifelong Learning, University of Oxford, alongside Julie (a Senior Manager of Digital Pedagogy at the same institution). Both authors are therefore active, visible, members of a special interest group and committed, through their own curious nature, to develop understandings of AI in broader social settings. This methodological approach is apt because, as Ellis *et al.* (2011) state, it uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography in an attempt to intertwine Sarah's artist and scientific selves. This historical context aligns with Liamputtong's (202, p. :391) account of autoethnography, in which researchers situate themselves within their social world, often beginning with a personal story that weaves together individual and cultural elements throughout their lifetime. Similarly, Ellis and Bochner (2003, p. 206) emphasise starting from personal experience, attending to physical sensations, thoughts, and emotions through introspection and emotional recall, and writing these lived experiences as narrative. Indeed, Adams (2012, p. 192) adds to this argument by stating '*good autoethnography shows how and why the individual and the cultural... the personal and the political intertwine.*' Murphy *et al.* (2021) state that this approach is even more imperative now that the global landscape is becoming more digital, especially when AI and its future functionality is still uncertain (Bochner and Ellis, 2022, p. 9).

While Jeremiah (2023) captured his own interactions and subsequent reflections with ChatGPT4 over several months, using an autoethnographic narrative, Sarah and Julie decided to collaborate and discuss their perspectives on the first author's AI exploration, enabling reflective learning beyond the initial exploration (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). They are not the first to work as a pair using a collaborative ethnographic approach; more recently, Al-Fattal and Singh (2025) reviewed their personal reflections of their manual approach to thematically analyse data and then they invited GenAI to do the same. Although they worked closely together throughout the research project, this paper is different in that Sarah initially explored her interactions with GenAI on her own. With this in mind, Elliot (1964) described how Sarah would need a period of gestation, three months post expedition, prior to forming any reflexive discussion with Julie. Moustakas (2011, p 3), however, reminded both narrators that this research is still the first author's self-reflection and will continue to be heuristic in nature as it draws on her direct experience. This approach is similar to Turns and Flores (2025), who met eight times to debrief on what the first author was trailing with GenAI to promote thinking and deeper reflection. Therefore, Julie became the collaborator and facilitator of thinking (Wolfe *et al.*, 2018) for Sarah. Grushka (2007, p; 355) states that, '*...this reflected connectedness bridges the individual life, family, society and the world.... A process where the self and others are parallel and vital agencies of mind [can] inform each other...*', thus possibly bringing Mercer's (2012) description of complex agency to the foreground.

RESEARCH DESIGN: INTO THE AI WONDERLAND

This research was three-fold. First, Sarah adopted a “hermeneutic circle” whereby she sought ‘to understand an object of interpretation, through a poem’ (Van Ness, 2011, p. 302), hence the adoption of A. A. Milne’s classic prose *Halfway Down*. According to Anggara and Yusup (2026), this type of reflection through poetry facilitates emotional connections and depth of interpretation which aligns with the initial autoethnographic approach adopted by Sarah. Indeed, this poem was read to Sarah by her late father, Stephen Frodsham, when she was young. It was one of his favourites. Hoult (2020) states that poetry can be used in research to open up multiple meanings and express complex identity rather than a singular perspective. This approach, therefore, seemed apt for Sarah to have reflected on this poem through the autoethnographic lens of her childhood and then through the paradigms which she has traversed as an adult, namely, as a scientist, social science and arts practitioner. The second phase involved asking GenAI to do the same task. Sarah specifically asked GenAI the following questions: ‘How would a child interpret this poem’ and then, ‘How would a scientist/positivist interpret it?’ The same question was asked about the social scientist and artist practitioner sequentially. For this paper, Sarah used GenAI only once, during a single, time-bound session. She deliberately chose not to continue to prompt further engagement within the digital space, because she wanted to focus on her immediate experience - her emotions, thoughts, and physical responses as they occurred in that moment. Through this, she aimed to reflect on her own independence and decision-making, examining how this might be understood through different theoretical perspectives when GenAI is positioned as a facilitative “other.” She was essentially creating critical incidents to question whether and how she could demonstrate her own agency through this interaction. Although she was initially worried that this approach might overlook more complex forms of agency, she was interested in how creating a space, with this poem, in this constrained setting, could shape her engagement with digital interaction. Finally, the third stage was for Julie and Sarah to collectively contrast these sets of outputs and evaluate how AI could be adopted to support learning. With these objectives in hand, Sarah traversed the AI landscape through the poem reified below.

Halfway down

*Halfway down the stairs is a stair where I sit.
There isn't any other stair quite like it.
I'm not at the bottom, I'm not at the top;
So this is the stair where I always stop.*

*Halfway up the stairs isn't up
And it isn't down.
It isn't in the nursery,
It isn't in town.
And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run round my head.
It isn't really Anywhere!
It's somewhere else instead!*

by A. A. Milne (1924).

RESULTS OF PHASES 1 AND 2: EXPLORING THE STAIRWAY PERSONALLY AND DIGITALLY

The childhood perspective of being neither in the town or the nursery

As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p. 16) stated, self-explorations like this one invite connections and create spaces to recognise experiences associated with the poem. This poem's narrative enabled Sarah to reflect on the social and cultural experiences that she had been afforded during her lifetime. That is, Sarah was viewing the poem through the historical lens of her child-self. She recollects the warmth she felt when her father read the poem by her bedside and even GenAI described how 'it's the kind of poem that feels cozy, like a bedtime story.' Personally, for Sarah, it also evoked feelings of the entire family in the household because their shoes usually festooned each step of the stairway. Additionally, thanks to her father's love of this poem, she also recalled how she was ontologically convinced that if she walked down the stairs backwards, all the way to the bottom, she could be transported anywhere from these stairs if she just believed hard enough. She recalls demonstrating her learner agency by putting this imaginative theory into practice but was thwarted by her mother who, two steps from the bottom, picked her up to sweep her away to the family dining table in time for tea. These stories were accessed from Sarah's memory but, in contrast, GenAI listed descriptions of how a child would find the poem relatable, noting how 'many children have a favourite spot – under a table or behind a sofa.' It also suggested that they would find it 'imaginative' 'a bit quirky' and 'funny or silly'.

By examining this poem through the lens of her childhood Sarah may have sat alone with the GenAI app on her phone, but she did not situate herself as a lone scientist (Dewey, 1934). This, she reflected, was actually a false fallacy, and she subsequently rejected the notion of sensemaking being segregated from her past social and everyday experiences. That is, Sarah recognised how this emotive poem spoke to her, historically, on both inter- and intrapersonal levels and over time. This was complex agency in action and the unobservable connectedness between her and her late father.

The Biochemist's view of the stair where *they* always sat

As we traverse from Sarah's childhood to her lived experience of being a scientist there is a change in tone. She begins to ask objective questions about the poem, including enquiring about the number of steps – after all, if there are an even number of steps, then there would be no step to sit on half-way down. If there is indeed a stair, why does the child always stop on that particular step? What is observably different about it? There would also be the question regarding whether they do stop there 100% of the time, and for how long. Finally, like Schrodinger's cat, the child is in the in-between state where reality is not fixed. While the theoretical cat is simultaneously dead or alive the child is neither up nor down. In fact, from a positivist's ontological perspective there is only one reality and, therefore, having observed neither the cat or child, as a scientist we are unable to state that either exists (Denzin *et al.*, 2023). This adds an additional layer of tension between Sarah's agentive imaginative experience as a child and the scientist-self's desire for verifiable knowledge. While Sarah as a scientist may not be exercising agency in the same imaginative sense as the child, she nonetheless demonstrates a form of agency through her persistent questioning of the observable world. By contrast, GenAI's interpretation of a scientist/positivist perspective extends beyond a narrow focus on empirical verification. It introduces additional considerations, such as 'environmental factors influencing behaviour.' Yet, it ultimately concludes, much like Sarah the scientist, that a 'strict positivist' would regard the scenario as merely a poetic expression, rather than as a claim amenable to empirical investigation.

It is interesting to note that the GenAI script, post scientific analysis, generated multiple ideas that resonated with Sarah's own positivistic mindset, but it also provided a broader explanation of how a scientist might think. Rather than facilitating deeper thought about her stance, Sarah's immediate response was to feel somewhat stripped of her own independent thought. She was initially unsure whether she would have time to seek out literature to support GenAI's unreferenced claims. Interestingly, she felt that her adventure in this AI Wonderland moved from an autoethnographic exploration to a need to validate her own academic competence. This was arguably akin to Alice's deliberations as to whether or not to visit the March Hare.

The interpretivist was placed somewhere else instead.

From a social science perspective, Sarah recognised that the person in the poem had no direct access to the world beyond 'the step where they always sit' but could recognise other realities (e.g., the nursery or town). Consequently, whether the town or nursery was up or down the stairs became irrelevant, because meanings were generated from their immediate positioning, namely, what they could explore on their own as a 'lone scientist' at that atomised moment in time, like the reified interaction between Cat and the protagonist Alice. GenAI also identified four key themes: subjective experience, social and cultural context, liminality, and narrative meaning-making. Under each heading, it generated further provocations, asking, for example, "what does this space mean to a child?" and "how does the child construct this meaning through language and imagination?" It suggested that the child's decision to sit in this "in-between" space could be read as an expression of agency. In addition and similarly to the previous two lenses, childhood and scientist, GenAI's response offered no references for Sarah to trace and situate in context. In summary, the limitation of the generated interpretations omitted the transparency and reflexivity that underpin interpretivist research practices, and therefore, complex agency was wanting.

The liminal possibilities of the singular stair

Sarah, as artist, recognised the creative tension described by Perry (2008, cited in Hall 2010), who argued that contemporary artists often engage the part of us that is deeply uncomfortable with uncertainty. That is this person, sitting on a middle step is considering where they are positioned and what their reality is. They know what lies beyond this middle step but, as readers, we are unsure whether the nursery is up or down the stairs. Perhaps they are on the cusp of embracing uncertainty, or are about to experience an epistemic insight as they decide to move either up or down the steps. After all, they are having 'all sorts of funny thoughts' running round their head. As an artist, Hannahan (2006, p. 152) similarly emphasises that the challenge is not to eliminate this discomfort, but to *own* it, embracing the continual making and remaking of meaning. In reading Milne's poem, Sarah, the artist, found herself doing exactly this: asking "What if...?" and moving, from a focus on *what is* being created to an exploration of *what might be* (Chappell and Cremin, 2014). The position of being "halfway down" became an imaginative threshold for Sarah and opened up a learning proposition of possibilities. As done previously, following reflection of the poem through the artist's lens, GenAI was invited to review the poem through the same lens. This pretrained algorithm generated the idea that an artist would say "*Halfway Down* is a poetic invitation to inhabit the in-between. It challenges linear movement and adult logic, offering instead a space of imaginative autonomy. As an artist, [GenAI espoused] I see the halfway stair as a site of inquiry – where stillness, embodiment, and poetic language converge to reveal new ways of knowing." A further five categories with descriptors emerged. These are: the stair as a site of inquiry, embodied experience, imaginative space making, poetic language as material and childhood as epistemology. Underneath each was text far longer than Sarah's own musings. Due to the volume of unreferenced text GenAI espoused, Sarah was beginning to feel more like the person at the end of the poem because she was having all sorts of funny questions running around her head about her own understanding of the

world. This rabbit hole had become a vast maze in front of her and her adventure in the AI wonderland had begun to spiral out of control. However, Pulk and Koris (2025, p. 9) recognised that GenAI produces a '*superficial mode of thinking [and] average work*' and UNESCO (2023) stated that '*While GenAI can produce new content, it cannot generate new ideas or solutions to real-world challenges, as it does not understand real-world objects or social relations that underpin language.*' Grushka's (2007, p. 355) bridge of 'connectedness' between 'life, family, society and the world' had ceased to exist for Sarah and her sensemaking had become segregated from her past and present social and everyday experiences. Indeed, what GenAI had omitted was not just the historical aspect of Sarah's meaning making but the more able other's social discourse (the equivalent to Alice's Cheshire cat). That is, Sarah felt as if she was not being offered opportunities to make her own decisions about this vast information being proffered. Feeling stripped of her capacity to act independently and not having the opportunity to make decisions through a mediator she was left feeling disorientated and 'somewhere else instead.'

PHASE 3: JULIE'S AND SARAH'S REFLEXIVE DISCUSSION

The importance of drawing on pre-understanding when considering one's own ontological and epistemological assumptions is highlighted by Denzin *et al.* (2023), and, as such, a qualitative researcher recognises and welcomes other realities and perspectives. In this case, Julie represented "the other" perspective. Her first comment to Sarah was that her curiosity had got the better of her. She recognised that, in her excitement, Sarah had rushed ahead without considering her own ZPD. Together, Julie and Sarah first explored what Sarah had consciously and unconsciously brought to her engagement with the app. In other words, they examined her underlying ontological assumptions and considered the extent to which these had, or, in this case, had not, been mediated in ways to stimulate further learning. It became apparent that the GenAI activity Sarah undertook had not been intentionally designed to safeguard her developing agency as a learner. As a result, she eventually disengaged from the learning process because the volume and pace of information overwhelmed her, and her ability to act independently as a learner (agentively) was effectively interrupted. In successful AI research, such as that conducted by Al-Fattal and Singh (2025), both researchers worked collaboratively throughout the process, supporting and challenging each other's interpretations. By contrast, Jeremiah's (2023) solitary exploration of their AI landscape resulted in a similar outcome to Sarah's experience. After engaging in dialogue with the AI, Jeremiah's response was to withdraw, perceiving the interaction as unproductive. Indeed, Jeremiah (2023) would suggest that Sarah experienced cognitive inflexibility and this would have contributed to her decision to withdraw rather than engage more deeply after her initial AI interactions. To counter this, Clay (2025, p. 2) argues that teachers, or another like Julie, must support learners in adopting the helpful uses of AI while persuading them to avoid the harmful ones, with the ultimate aim of strengthening learner agency. But, how to do this is still being questioned. Armed with this socially constructed knowing, both Julie and Sarah felt they could begin to answer their research question: "How does social context shape the adoption of generative AI in higher education, particularly within the agentive learning process?" That is, what this adventure in AI Wonderland and subsequent conversation with Julie has made evident is that facilitating agentive learning requires a social dialogue with another person. In Sarah's case, working with someone like Julie afforded her the opportunity to externalise her otherwise internal and solitary interaction with the digital other (Vine *et al.*, 2018).

Of course, an alternative consideration would be to think about how the structure of the task shaped Sarah's learning. After all, Sarah may have sat alone with the GenAI app on her phone, but she did not situate herself as a lone scientist (Dewey, 1934). In fact, in viewing the poem through the lens of a child she had rejected such divisions, realising the poem echoed with her history, revealing complex agency and unspoken bonds with her late father.

Therefore, if Sarah had structured her further interactions, as McGregor (2008) had proposed, with historical reflexivity in mind, rather than diving into the AI landscape without planning, her constructivist approach may well have been more targeted and fruitful. Mustafa Suleyman (2025), CEO of Microsoft AI, recently argued that consciousness can exist only in biological beings. From this perspective, the exchange between Sarah and AI could only ever have been superficial because it is a non-sentient algorithm generating text without any awareness of Sarah's historical, social, and cultural experiences and how these shape her learning as an individual independent thinker. Vine *et al.* (2018) noted that the constructivist approach used in this initial autoethnographic research also has the potential to generate anxiety for participants. Indeed, with Holman Jones's (2005, p. 764) assertion that "autoethnographers view research and writing as socially just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy," Sarah also reflected on her earlier scientific training with Julie. She recalled how she once believed in a singular ontological truth. During that period of her academic life, she had assumed the existence of an authoritative other whose truth she would either accept or reject (Wegerif, 2011). Yet, as an interpretivist researcher she acknowledges that "scientists and social scientists throughout history have been recognised for their ability to critique their philosophies from within and beyond their encultured bounded communities" (Frodsham, 2024, p. 58). With this understanding, Julie and Sarah viewed the writing of this paper as an opportunity to think through the established cultural and disciplinary boundaries of a singular perspective and discipline (Bochner & Ellis, 2022, p. 9) and consider how the digital can be designed to support all students' agentic learning. Therefore, rather than asking how GenAI can influence the role of the social context in higher education, we should be arguing about how students are provided with opportunities, prior to AI engagement and/or during, to make informed decisions and act upon them accordingly and constructively (Bruner, 1996).

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the spirit of reciprocal critical debate, both authors recognise that a single article is insufficient to capture the full complexity of learning processes, for example, the illumination of *Complex agency*, which appeared wanting through the lens of scientist, social scientist, and artist. This would require longitudinal, social interactions rather than the short-term, individual engagement presented. Looking forward, the paper invites research that adopts collaborative, longitudinal, and multi-participant designs to better capture the evolving nature of learner agency. Such work could examine how sustained interactions between learners, educators, and AI systems support the development of complex agency over time, while also integrating structured pedagogical frameworks to enhance meaningful engagement. In summary, it is through the iterative and reciprocal interactions among those involved in lifelong learning, including teachers, students, and administrative staff, and AI systems that a more comprehensive understanding will emerge. Ultimately, if GenAI is to be made widely accessible, stakeholders in lifelong learning must adopt collaborative, reflexive, and human-centred practices that extend across roles, disciplines, and temporal scales, while honouring the historical and pedagogical foundations that came before. After all, uncritical curiosity risks killing the curious 'Cheshire' cat, and neither Julie or Sarah want to undermine the role of the facilitative other.

REFERENCES

- Adams, T. E. (2012). *The Joys of Autoethnography: Possibilities of Communication Research*. Qualitative Communication Research, 1(2), pp. 181-194.
- Al-Fattal, A., and Singh, J. (2025). *Comparative Reflections on Human-Driven and Generative Artificial Intelligence-Assisted Thematic Analysis: A Collaborative Autoethnography*. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 24, Article 16094069251337870. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251337870>
- Anggara, R., and Yusup, E. (2026). *Teaching communication philosophy through poetry: Ontology, epistemology, and axiology in practice*. Communication Teacher, pp. 1–8
- Biesta, G., and Tedder, M. (2007). *Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective*. Studies in the Education of Adults, 39(2), pp.132-149
- Bochner, A. P. and Ellis, C. (2022). *Why Autoethnography?*. Social Work & Social Sciences Review, 18(1) pp. 8-18
- Bruner, J.S. (1996). *The Culture of Education*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA.
- Bruner, J. S., and Haste, H. (1987). *Making sense: the child's construction of the world*. London: Methuen.
- Bullough, R. V., and Pinnegar, S. (2001). *Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research*. Education Researcher, 30(3), pp. 13-21.
- Carroll, L. (1869). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Macmillan & Co: London
- Clay, S. (2025). *Is AI Enhancing Education or Replacing It? Technology should facilitate learning, not substitute for it*. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 71(18), p. 1.
- Chappell, K. and Cremin, T. (2014). *Anna Craft... and beyond*. Thinking Skills and Creativity, 14, pp. A3-A5.
- Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., Giardina, M. D., & Cannella, G. S. (Eds.). (2023). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (Sixth edition.). SAGE.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Elliot, T. S. (1964). *Excerpts from The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Retrieved from Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., and Bochner, A. P. (2011) Autoethnography: an overview. Historical Social Research, 36(4), pp. 273-290
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. P. (2003). *Autoethnography, personal narrative reflexivity*. In N.K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA
- Frodsham (2024). *The Critical Incidents of the Scientist in the Interpretivist Paradigm* (pp. 57-73) In McGregor, D., Frodsham, S and Enduran, S (Eds). *Celebrating Diversity in Becoming an Educational Researcher*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Hall, J. (2010). *Making Art, Teaching Art, Learning Art: Exploring the Concept of the Artist Teacher*. The International Journal of Art & Design Education, 29(2), pp. 103-110.

Hanrahan, S. (2006). Poesis, in Macleod, K., & Holdridge, L. (Eds). *Thinking through art: Reflections on art as research* (Innovations in art and design). London; New York: Routledge.

Heintz, F. (2025). *The future of LLL in the next 10-20 years*. Presentation at the 2025 **eucen** Autumn Seminar, University of Barcelona, Spain.

Holman Jones, S. (2005). *Autoethnography: Making the personal political*. In Handbook of qualitative research, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, pp. 763-791. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sa

Hoult, E.C., Mort, H., Pahl, K. and Rasool, Z. (2020). *Poetry as method – trying to see the world differently*. Research for All, 4(1): pp. 87–101.

Jarvis, P. (2024). *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice* (5th ed.). London: Routledge.

Jeremiah, F. (2024). *Through the AI thinking space: An autoethnographic tale of unexpected insight*. European Research Studies Journal, XXVI(2), pp. 715-728

Liamputtong, P. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piaget, J., and Inhelder, B. (1969). *The Psychology of the Child*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Pulk, K., and Koris, R. (Eds.). (2025). *Generative AI in Higher Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (First ed.). Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

MacDonald, A. (2025). *Accelerating or elevating students' learning? Case studies of AI-based support for students at Oxford University*. Presentation at the 2025 **eucen** Autumn Seminar, University of Barcelona, Spain.

Manyukhina, Y., Wyse, D. (2019), *Learner agency and the curriculum: A critical realist perspective*. Curric. J. 2019(30), pp. 223–243

McGregor, D. (2008). *The influence of task structure on students' learning processes: observations from case studies in secondary school science*. Journal of curriculum studies, 40(4), 509-540.

Mercer, S. *The complexity of Learner Agency*. J. Appl. Lang. Stud. 2012, 6, pp. 41–59.

Milne, A.A. (1924) *Halfway Down*. Available at: <https://allpoetry.com/Halfway-Down>. (Accessed: 31 October 2025)

Milne, I. (2011). *Creative Exploration*. In D. Davies (Ed.), Teaching Science Creatively. (pp. 61-71). Abingdon: Routledge.

Moustakas, C. E. (2011). *Heuristic research: design, methodology, and applications*. Sage Publications.

Murphy, A. K., Jerolmack, C., and Smith, D. (2021). *Ethnography, Data Transparency, and the Information Age*. Annual Review of Sociology, 47(1), pp. 41–61.

Spiro, J. (2014). *We are what we read: Personal reading histories and the shaping of the teacher*. The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL, 3(2), pp. 107

Suleyman, M. (2025). *Microsoft AI chief says only biological beings can be conscious*. Retrieved from: [Microsoft AI chief says only biological beings can be conscious](#). (Accessed 01 November 2025)

Turns, J. A., and Flores, Y. (2025). *Generative AI as a Thinking Partner in Doctoral Education: An Autoethnographic Exploration*. Paper presented at 2025 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition: Montreal.

Van Ness, P. H., Fried, T. R., and Gill, T. M. (2011). *Mixed Methods for the Interpretation of Longitudinal Gerontologic Data: Insights From Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 5(4), pp. 293–308.

UNESCO. (2023). *Guidance for generative AI in education and research*. UNESCO. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep70313>

University of Oxford (2025) *Generative AI at Oxford*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/gen-ai>. (Accessed 02 January 2026)

Vine, T., Clark, J., Richards, S., and Weir, D. (Eds.). (2018). *Ethnographic research and analysis: anxiety, identity and self*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. London: Harvard University Press.

Wegerif, R. (2011). *Towards a dialogic theory of how children learn to think*. Thinking Skills and Creativity, 6(3), pp. 179–190.

Wolfe, K., Berger Nelson, A., and L Seamster, C. (2018). *In Good Company: A Collaborative Autoethnography Describing the Evolution of a Successful Doctoral Cohort*. International Journal of Doctoral Studies: IJDS., 13, pp. 293–311.