From performativity to authenticity – a critical reflection on the journey of becoming a critical scholar

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Abstract

When I first read Bruce MacFarlane's Think Piece, *'Faking' close-up research?: the risks of strategic deception in a post-truth world*, I felt defensive. As a doctoral researcher, attempting critical scholarly work, I struggled with the suggestion that my work might be "deceptive" or "fake." I felt this way until I realized I may have done exactly the thing that MacFarlane writes about in his Think Piece; namely, the "production of 'ready-to-wear' positionality statements," applied in an instrumental, surface-level way. This realization served as a critical incident for me, one that I use as a point of departure for a critical auto-ethnographic account that forms the basis of my talk and forthcoming paper.

The context of this account sits within engineering education research (EER), an area of higher education research that seeks to advance practice and research in engineering higher education. Over the last 15-20 years, the priorities of EER have evolved, from descriptive research, primarily used to share classroom-based practices, toward the interrogation of more fundamental questions, such as "what is engineering for?" and applying that learning to the engineering curriculum. Despite that evolution, the field still grapples with disagreements in priorities, research questions and a wide variety of methodological approaches, and with them, varying epistemological approaches and demands.

This has been a challenging starting point for an early career researcher, especially as the first doctoral student in the engineering department at my university to focus on educational research. Through this reflective account, I aim to shed light on some of the structural barriers to doing critical research in a positivist world, alongside agentic stories of transcendence. In doing so, I hope to challenge what MacFarlane calls "strategic deception," and instead consider the existence of a steep learning curve in doing critical scholarship.

In acknowledging the difficulty of this type of work, I then offer a challenge: is it not the role of this community of scholars and academic advisors to extend the proverbial olive branch? Few aspects of academic life within modern neoliberal capitalism generate the conditions for robust and thoughtful critical scholarship. During this session, I hope to provoke discussion on how, as an academic community, we can use the tools of scholarship and praxis to fight against the chains of our condition. Instead of calling out strategic deception, I wonder, how can we better support our collective, radical endeavour?

Keywords

Critical Scholarship, Praxis, Engineering Education, Positionality, Auto-ethnography