



Reflecting on 50 Years in Education: A Pilgrimage, a Quest, or Something More Relational?

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Annotation. In questioning the nature of an ‘educational journey’, the common analogies of ‘a pilgrimage’ or ‘a quest’ need to give sufficient prominence to the central role of relationality. This is explored here through an autoethnographic case study, in which plateaus in the intellectual journey are signalled through a re-examination of the author’s prior published work. The concept of epistemological rehabilitation is introduced as a focus for university teacher development.

Keywords: *epistemological rehabilitation, autoethnography, ecological university, educational journey, Anthropocene.*

Introduction

Education is often described using metaphors that relate to a journey. The basic assumption is that we all set off as novices, and once we pass through various rites of passage, we emerge as experts at the end of our journey. However, this is a seductive metaphor whose simplicity may mask several problems and misconceptions that are exacerbated by the prevalence of neoliberal values within the current higher education sector:

- The evident paradox of the ‘journey’s end’ within a context of ‘lifelong learning’ highlights the lack of internal logic within the current system.
- The assumed linearity of the journey and the steady, cumulative acquisition of knowledge along the way by all students at the same rate and in the same manner is rarely questioned but does not reflect practice.

- The inevitability of the destination is assumed. For example, if one takes a train from London to Edinburgh, there would be little acceptance of an imposed terminus at Cambridge – even if there were advantages to be gained. This fixed destination analogy is rife within the dominant learning and teaching narratives and is amplified by the insistence that all teaching episodes should have clearly articulated learning outcomes, despite the inherent weaknesses in this approach (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022, pp. 67–70).

In addition, most of the narratives that consider learning are focused on students rather than on teachers. Within the higher education sector there is an assumption that ‘excellence’ is the universal standard for teachers, even though the nature of this excellence is rarely articulated (Gravett & Kinchin, 2020). This appears to over-write any possibility that teachers are also learning as a result of reflection of their practice. This is despite reflective practice (*sensu* Schön, 1983) being a dominant theory in university teacher development programmes (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

The concept of a pedagogical pilgrimage has been developed by Davids and Waghid (2019, p. xiv), who argue that ‘If higher education is to remain responsive to a public good, then teaching and learning have to be in a perpetual state of reflection and change’ and ‘ought to be considered in relation to the idea of a pedagogic pilgrimage’. Within this paper, I offer a shift in gaze on the idea of a pedagogic pilgrimage by juxtaposing the concept of epistemological rehabilitation within an ecological analytical lens. This aligns with the recognition of ‘pedagogy’ as one of the wicked problems of the Anthropocene (Ellsworth, 2015).

Method

The autoethnographic approach adopted within this paper is a non-linear examination of my personal educational journey. As expressed by McGeary (2015) ‘in order to contribute to and allow a process of knowledge creation, a dialogue must unfold. This requires me to provide the reader with at least cursory ‘data’ of both who I am, and what my process around the unfolding of knowledge has been’ (p. 61). I have been engaged in education (as a student, a teacher, and a researcher) for over fifty years. In the past two decades I have switched from being a student and subsequent teacher of biology to undertaking a role in supporting the professional development of university teachers. It is only within this second half of my career that I have seriously reflected on my practice, and only in the past few years that it has taken an ecological turn (Kinchin, 2023). In addition, as my focus during this time has been educational research, there are a number of academic artefacts (publications) that provide documentary evidence of the evolution of my thinking.

In line with Stewart (2015), ‘My contemplation of past pedagogical and curriculum activities has not been linear or sequential; to produce a narrative that suggested the process was chronological would have been inappropriate. Although the final document may appear linear, its writing and production were anything but’ (p. 1180). My adoption of a rhizomatic approach to my research (Guerin, 2013; Samson et al., 2022) means there is no fixed destination but rather a constant emergent state of becoming where I am ‘always in the middle’ (Kinchin, 2024, p. 130). The lack of overriding linearity in a rhizomatic analysis means this work has no definitive end point – it is still ‘becoming’ (*sensu* May, 2003). However, within the rhizome there are points where one may pause to articulate the moment. These pauses have been described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as plateaus, with the nature of a plateau summarised by Massumi (1992, p. 7):

a plateau is reached when circumstances combine to bring an activity to a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax – leading to a state of rest. The heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or reinjected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist.

The published outputs that illustrate points in my academic journey provide the detail (the afterimage) of individual plateaus, points of pause, and reflection within the assemblage. The role of this reflective narrative is, therefore, not to reiterate all the arguments and findings of each of these outputs, rather, it is to outline the plateaus, to trace some of the links that fill the gaps between the plateaus, and to provide an appreciation of the wider context in which they operate. Such plateaus can be summarized pictorially with reference to key figures and images that appeared in the publications that summarize the key concepts (See Annex).

While I have written some of my earlier outputs cited in this paper as sole author, many are co-authored with colleagues who have contributed to my thinking and helped me to develop my ideas. In a number of the publications listed, I have deliberately invited research participants to be co-authors rather than simply using their data anonymously, and this was reflected in work undertaken over several years within the ‘students-as-partners’ movement (Ali et al., 2021; Kinchin et al., 2024). This requires a rhizomatic decentering from the typical autoethnographic gaze. To highlight this, some of the cited research outputs have been designated as a ‘collaborative cartography’ (Kinchin et al., 2021), or a ‘collective biography’ (Kinchin et al., 2023). This sharing of authorship is in recognition of the mutual entanglements of the various voices within the rhizome in line with Smagorinsky et al. (2006, p. 100), who concluded that:

sharing authorship requires the sharing of much more than ownership. It also requires a shared perspective on the part of university-based teachers and researchers on how classroom-based teachers and researchers experience their work. Sharing authorship is rhizomatic rather than arborescent—it involves, as we conceive it, the reterritorial-

ization of cultural practices as part of a new and mutual process of becoming.

This 'mutual process of becoming' is now a way for me to perceive my role as academic developer and fits with the idea of researcher-led academic development (Kinchin et al., 2018).

Emerging Alternatives to the 'Journey' Metaphor

A number of authors are starting to question the value of the 'journey' metaphor in education. For example, Ostojić et al (2023, p. 69) comment:

it is neither advisable nor fruitful to uncritically adopt and follow a pattern where the beginning of education (the point of departure) and its goal (the point of arrival or destination) are strictly predefined, especially if it entails the exclusion of any deviation from the trajectory connecting the 'origin' and the 'destination'.

This critique of the educational journey is not new. For example, Dewey (1910) commented on the way in which the portrayed linearity of the student's journey through the curriculum does not reflect the path of progress followed by a mind that is learning, where the curriculum 'may be described by a uniform straight-way course' (p. 204), but the path taken by the student is more likely to 'be a series of zig-zag movements back and forth'. In line with McCulloch (2013, p. 56), I would also question the use of the term 'journey':

the problem is that the notion of journey implies a known start and a known destination, that the terrain to be covered can be mapped out in advance, and that the only real issue for the traveler is how much they would like to pay, which route they would like to follow, which mode of transport they would like to take, how much comfort would they like to experience whilst travelling, and how long they would like the trip to take.

McCulloch suggests the term 'quest' is more appropriate as implicit in its meaning is that the traveler is in search of something of which they have no prior experience, and it is not clear when one has 'arrived'. However, the physical context of the quest influences the process, and a place-responsive reflective process may help create individuals who are more attuned to specifying information that can be used to support the regulation of action towards the achievement of a task within their ecological niche. This is achieved by establishing a 'functionally adaptable fit' between their evolving capabilities and the affordances of the environment. This is explored by Woods et al. (2021, p. 4) using a hiking analogy:

A map may initially help orient an individual who is about to hike an unfamiliar region . . . But an enskilled hiker is more interested in supporting their journey by progressively learning about the terrain, flora and fauna, climate, celestial movements and local history (for example) – things difficult to directly experience and

thus come to 'know of' by only ever following markings scribed on the surface of a map!

Reader (2006) outlines a similar phenomenon when describing the depth of engagement of pilgrims who *walk the trail*, in contrast to those who *take the bus* and do not immerse themselves in the learning activities at each stop; they get their books stamped and return to the bus. The perspective of walking pilgrims, he writes, 'is shaped by the physical conditions of their journeys. Unlike bus pilgrims who exist in a communal atmosphere', a walking pilgrim's journal, he continues, provides 'plentiful descriptions of the paths, roads, vegetation, and flowers seen as he walks but tends to make only perfunctory comments about the temple's themselves' (p. 189). That is a focus on the journey rather than the destination – the spaces between the plateaus.

As she reflects upon her own teaching career, Le Cornu (2021) has used 'pilgrimage' as a metaphor for learning – a term that fits well with her context of theological education. Le Cornu acknowledges the overlap between the language typically used in education and that of experiential learning on a pilgrimage. She comments about the risks of leaving 'known terrain', something that is emphasized by Palmer (1997, p. 8):

To undertake a pilgrimage is to put yourself at risk ... the risk that you might not return as the same person who set out. The risk that all you had thought you knew, understood, perhaps carefully constructed in your mind, might be blown apart.

Palmer's words are particularly relevant within the neoliberal university context that is characterized by its overtly risk-averse culture and where the cult of individualism means that the risk of exposing vulnerabilities on a pilgrimage is borne by the pilgrim on their own. This reduces the likelihood of an academic daring to expose their vulnerabilities by undertaking the pilgrimage in the first place unless they are part of a supportive community. However, change is often the expressed intent of such journeys: 'regardless of whether a pilgrimage is undertaken for devotional, instrumental, normative, obligatory, wandering or initiatory purposes, a personal transformation, or a shift in the pilgrim's outlook, appears to be a commonly referenced outcome (McGeary, 2015, p. 24).

Historically, the focus of a quest or a pilgrimage is often the central 'heroic' character with an emphasis on their personal development and theirs alone, whether cognitive, physical, or spiritual. However, it has become evident to me that the other actors in this narrative are possibly the most important factor in the evolution of my practice – a feeling that I hope would be reciprocated by colleagues who have lined my path. My approach to pedagogic research has reflected my commitment to the central idea of relationality. This is an idea that seeks to understand a system not so much as a set of interacting objects, but as a web of relationships with a focus on the 'space in between' (Lejano, 2019). I have tried to avoid the extractivist tendencies of the neoliberal uni-

versity where ‘hit-and-run researchers’ (as described by Davis, 2007) extract the data they need while staying at arm’s length from the communities they are studying. This resonates with the long-established process of imperial epistemic extractivism where the Global North harvests data from the Global South to produce academic knowledge which disproportionately benefits the Global North (Cruz & Luke, 2020). Instead, I have typically been embedded within the teaching communities that were also the focus of my work. So, I have been examining my own thoughts and feelings every bit as much as those colleagues who might typically be referred to as ‘research subjects’. Therefore, I may characterize my activities as ‘research with’ rather than ‘research on’ such that I have often invited my colleagues to act as co-authors in many of the resulting papers. This leads me to ask if I am a researcher or a research subject? Am I a teacher or a student? And ultimately, whether these labels really matter?

Blurring of Identities

I have become aware that at various points in my publication history I have felt the need to blur the lines between the personal and professional as I have explored the value of an autoethnographic approach in my writing. This is something that was completely alien to my early training in the natural sciences, where I made every effort to bracket out the observer. I was explicit in my aim of aspiring to the discovery of Isaac Newton’s ‘great ocean of truth’ (Kinchin, 1994, v.). I later became more engaged in the notion of observer participation during my initial explorations of pedagogic frailty (Kinchin et al., 2016). In this work I was making analogies and drawing parallels with the literature on clinical frailty. I was exploring the concept of clinical frailty at the time to try to understand what was happening to my father in the last years of his life, and the impact it was also having on me and my identity (Kinchin & Wilkinson, 2016). This was the first time that I acknowledged the fluidity of my identity as it oscillated on a daily basis between ‘son’, ‘carer’, ‘visitor’, and ‘pedagogue’.

I was also noticing the similar effects that such personal reflection on practice was having on various colleagues who were brave enough to explore their teaching practice with me to interrogate the pedagogic frailty model (Kinchin & Winstone, 2018) and to interrogate their own professional identities (Kinchin et al., 2021; Kinchin et al., 2024). This was a shared ‘journey’ where none of us knew what the ‘destination’ would look like. Moving further against my earlier training in science, I used poetry to thank these colleagues for their willingness to take risk of exposing their teaching vulnerabilities within a risk-averse environment when I wrote:

As you speak out from the shadow of frailty, you are our best teacher.
From there you bend our insight and swell our knowledge,
Restore our feeling of compassion,
And colour the depth of our understanding.

(Kinchin et al., 2023, p. 6)

The use of poetry in this way indicates an acknowledgement of the importance of the subjective and affective dimensions of knowledge creation (Gravett & Lygo-Baker, 2024) that cannot be usefully separated from objective knowledge. At which point it may be helpful to introduce the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie* that is translated in English as *emotional experience* or *lived experience* (McNamara, 2023) and can be viewed as offering ‘units of our autobiography’ (Blunden, 2016, p. 282). Cong-Lem (2022) highlights that at the heart of a *perezhivanie* is its refractive prism that comprises both cognitive and emotional processes. Therefore, by considering a *perezhivanie* as a unit of analysis, it avoids a reductionist separation of cognitive and emotional aspects of experience.

Shifting the Gaze

A major shift in my thinking was initiated during a collaborative writing project with a colleague (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022), that showed how the ‘structuralist me’ could relate to the ‘poststructuralist me’ in a way that addressed the ‘reciprocal incompleteness’ (*sensu* Santos, 2016, p. 212) of each within my academic gaze, and supported a subsequent move towards recognition of teaching as an ecological consilience (Kinchin, 2025). By constructing an epistemological consilience between structuralist and post-structuralist traditions, I have found, as expressed by Le Cornu (2021) that, ‘there is something very personally satisfying about completing the circle, about bringing insights from one area of my professional life into dialogue with another’ (p. 375). My intention here to re-explore my professional narrative aligns with the work of Dillon and Craig (2022), who propose a framework that recognizes the value of storytelling as a form of sense-making in the face of complexity and uncertainty that is particularly valuable when confronting the wicked problems of the Anthropocene that, by their nature, require stakeholders to exhibit a plurality of literacies that spans the natural sciences and the humanities. The activities of teaching and learning represent such a wicked problem. Within this context, storytelling allows us to gather narrative evidence that brings together the inner and outer worlds of subjectivity and objectivity to form a coherent story that transcends and transforms the typical (and epistemologically singular) neoliberal, deficit-driven conversation (Hensley, 2023).

I realized late in my career that adoption of an epistemologically plural gaze was a prerequisite step to successful articulation of exploitation of the so-called ‘third space’ in university organization (*sensu* Whitchurch, 2008) – where I had been working for two decades, but only latterly applied a socio-ecological lens to analysis of my practice (Kinchin & Pugh, 2024). In addition, the realization that acceptance of this reciprocity of knowledges did not require that I abandon my background in the natural sciences was a major step in my ‘epistemological re-habilitation’. For this, I am thankful to Lorraine Code (2006; 2012) and Andrea Doucet (2021) for their deeply insightful analysis of the work of Rachel Carson (1962) that offered an accessible gateway into ideas that

unsettled my existing academic identity. Carson represented my academic past in that her work on environmentalism informed my process of becoming a biologist. However, a renewed poststructuralist gaze on her work helped to inform my identity as an epistemological pluralist. I have explored this in some detail elsewhere (Kinchin, 2024), but it is worth reiterating here the fundamental issues that centre around the examination of the many facets of epistemology (Kinchin, 2025) and the need for epistemic humility (Potter, 2022): the requirement that we continually examine assumptions of cognitive authority and ensure it does not simply suppress criticism from a range of viewpoints by inhibiting diversity within the wider narrative ecology. This involves an epistemological shudder (Charteris, 2014) that generates a move from the constrictions of epistemological extractivism and epistemological narrowing towards a professional liberation through epistemological vulnerability and epistemological humility (Kinchin, 2025) – an epistemological rehabilitation.

In my own pilgrimage, there is a point of epistemological inflection somewhere between 2016 and 2020. In 2016, I published a synthesis of works on concept mapping that was explicitly structuralist in its perspective (Kinchin, 2016). This was representative of the epistemological basis of the field at the time and was a way of ensuring accessibility for the target audience. However, by 2020 I had realized that a shift in gaze opened up a new way of critiquing this work that offered a fresh lens on how concept mapping might be applied that would make it accessible to a wider audience (Kinchin & Gravett, 2020). For the author, there is an apparent trade-off between the comfort afforded by accepted terminology and agreed assumptions of an epistemic community on the one hand, and the excitement of breaking new ground and challenging orthodoxy on the other hand.

Conclusions

Elements of my own pedagogic pilgrimage resonate strongly with that described by Yusef Waghid who describes his own development from teaching high school science that was dominated by an approach that he identifies as ‘indoctrination, explanation, and persuasion’ that were demanded by the context. This gave way to a different approach as he moved into university teaching, that was dominated by the three ‘Ds’: ‘deliberation, deconstruction, and disruption’ that imply ‘more than a uni-directional flow of thought but rather an engagement with it’ (David & Waghid, 2019, pp. 94–95). I recognize a similar shift in my own philosophy of teaching as I transitioned from ‘science teacher’ to ‘teacher educator’, and it leads me to question whether my own naïve epistemologically singular gaze had, over the years, contributed to epistemological injustice (*sensu* Fricker, 2007) that may have been silently experienced by participants on the teacher development courses that I was running?

Young and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2020) argue that learning is not about the imitation of fixed ideas, but rather about, ‘uncovering our ability and the ability of others, to see anew.’ (p. 30). It is a constant process of emergent becoming. While modernist approaches propose that entities are distinct and essentially static, systems approaches consider entities to be distinct, but are in constant movement and interaction with each other. However, relational approaches suggest that what we perceive as entities are already constituted by movement and change. As such relational thought considers entities as ‘plateaus’ that offer a temporary state of rest that is sustained for long enough to leave an afterimage that can be reactivated into other activities (Masumi, 1992). However, without continual reflection on practice, it is likely that these plateaus will dissipate before they are recognized.

I have found the idea of ‘epistemological rehabilitation’ to be helpful in my efforts to maintain my learning trajectory and to ‘see anew’ (as described by Young and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020), and this aligns with the concept of epistemological humility (Potter, 2022), where my interactions with colleagues oscillates to develop ‘a rhythm for the alternation of knowledge and ignorance’ (Parviainen et al., 2021) so that our identities also oscillate between student and teacher (Gravett et al., 2022).

For colleagues who wish to refresh their teaching and develop a new gaze on their pedagogic pilgrimage, I recommend generating dialogue with peers from disciplines that sit across the epistemological divide. This needs to be undertaken with a level of epistemological humility and, where necessary, supported by colleagues who work as third space practitioners to help in the construction of an epistemological bridge (Kinchin & Pugh, 2024). This approach requires mutual trust and respect and a willingness to engage explicitly in epistemological vulnerability (Gilson, 2014). In this way, colleagues may develop a sophisticated epistemological gaze. Of course, every pedagogic pilgrimage will be unique, and each pilgrim will need the courage to undertake their own journey.

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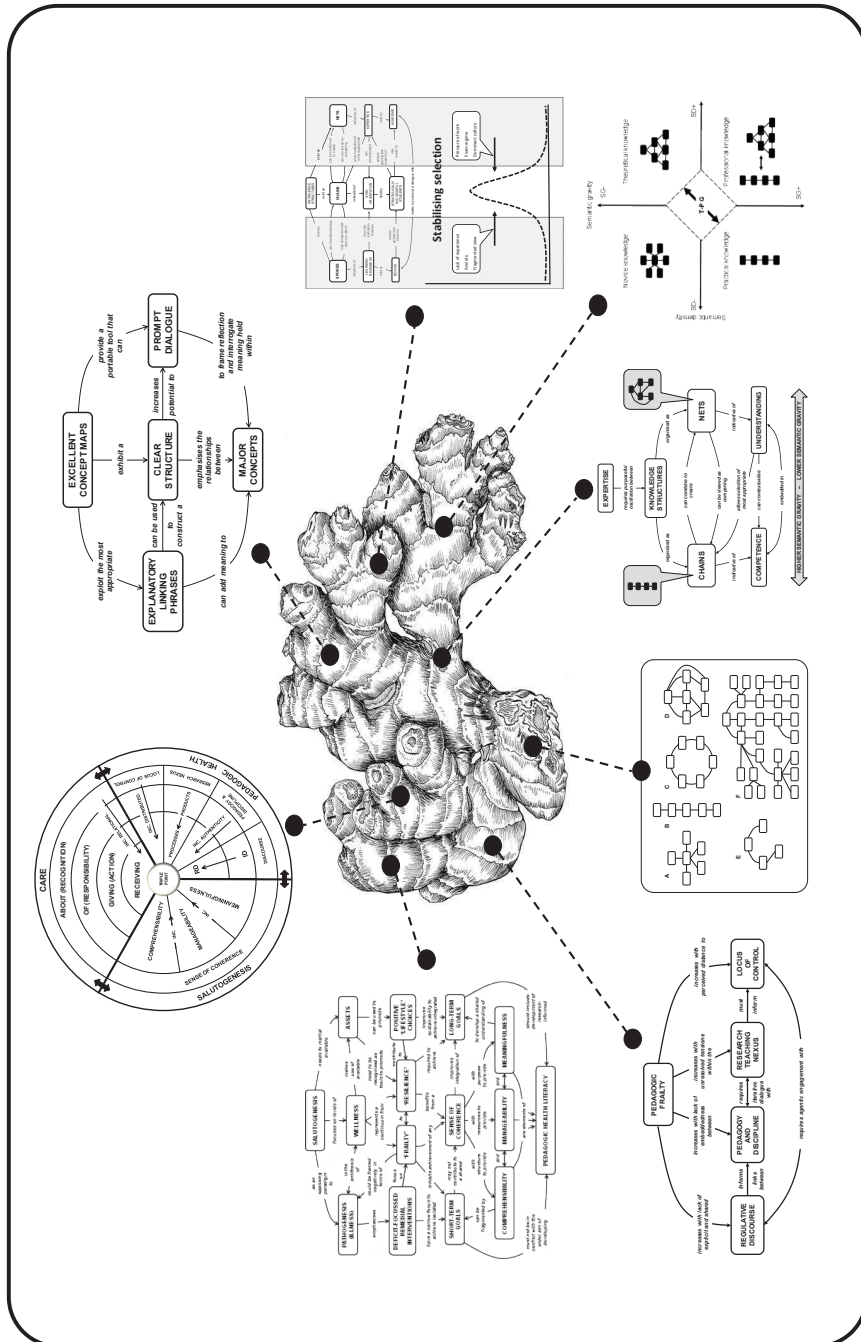
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Annex

Key Concepts that Form Eight Plateaus Within this Pilgrimage (from Kinchin, 2020)



50 metų švietimo srityje: piligriminė kelionė, ieškojimai ar kažkas reliatyviau?

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Santrauka

Apmąstant daugiau nei penkiasdešimties metų patirtį švietime (kaip studentas, mokytojas ir tyrėjas), pats refleksijos procesas jau kelia abejonių dėl „ugdamosios kelionės“ pobūdžio. Įprastos „piligriminės kelionės“ arba „ieškojimo“ analogijos turi tam tikrų apribojimų, o siūlant redukcinę linijinę eigą galima pasigesti pakankamai dėmesio su profesinės praktikos apmąstymu susijusiems aspektams. Pagrindinis santykio vaidmuo čia nagrinėjamas pasitelkiant autoetnografinę atvejo analizę, kurioje intelektualinės kelionės taškai nurodomi iš naujo išnagrinėjus anksčiau paskelbtą autoriaus darbą, į kurį žvelgiama epistemologiniu žvilgsniu. Atsirandanti perspektyva dera su ekologinio universiteto idėjomis, nelinijiniu (rizominiu) vystymusi ir mąstymu pogiluminiu laikotarpiu. Šios sąvokos yra svarbiausios autoriaus *epistemologinėje reabilitacijoje*, kuri gali būti suvokiama kaip reliatyvios piligrimystės atskleistų pažeidžiamumų transformacinio potencialo pasekmė. Ši epistemologinės reabilitacijos koncepcija gali būti veiksminga universiteto dėstytojų tobulėjimui šiuo metu dominuojančiame amžiuje, kuriam vis dar būdingos didelės neišspręstos antropoceno problemos.

Esminiai žodžiai: *epistemologinė reabilitacija, autoetnografija, ekologinis universitetas, edukacinė kelionė, antropocenas.*

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