

A collective autoethnographic journey toward academic repair:

Unfolding restorative micro-repair practices

Abstract

To find meaningful ways to resolve our work and reconnect with one another within neoliberal institutions, we seek to imagine practices that enable spaces of difference within workplaces. In this chapter, we use autoethnographic inspiration to describe the spontaneous unfolding of the relational process that is our collective, hoping to inspire others wishing to ‘repair’ their own workspaces. Our contribution is to offer restorative micro-repair as a means to forge reconnections within CHRD practice. Through reflecting on the unfolding of our journey we have identified some cornerstones for this type of alternative practice. These include the development of loose *structures* that enable divergent thinking and practices, an attention to group *processes* and an emphasis on *communality* through a relational, community-based approach. In telling the formation story of our own restorative micro-repair space, we set the stage to reflect upon how these cornerstones can serve to help others engage in micro-repair practices to reconnect to one another.

Keywords: micro-repair, Critical HRD, autoethnography, neoliberalism

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Academia is in a state of disrepair. The neoliberal university, with its unrelenting performativity, metrics obsession (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014; Jones et al., 2020) and increasing individualization has produced isolating, dehumanizing (Ratle et al., 2020) and stressful workplaces (Morrish, 2019; Smith and Ulus, 2020) that call into question whether academia constitutes a viable arena for a life's devotion (Harley, 2019: 286; Sandhu et al., 2019). The current system rewards individual careerism and narrow single mindedness at the expense of more eclectic and collective endeavours (Clarke and Knights, 2015). Not surprisingly, many have fiercely condemned the current academic system (see Harley, 2019), with some scholars even proposing that academics should leave the system altogether (Ahmed, 2016; Perel, 2018), or aim to transform it entirely (Parker, Martin, 2018). Yet for most academics, who both love their vocation and rely on it to make ends meet, these are not viable paths (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2016). It is from this ambivalent space that the concepts we present here emerge.

To find meaningful ways to resolve our work and reconnect with one another within neoliberal institutions, we seek to imagine practices that enable spaces of difference within workplaces. Drawing from some of our collective writings (e.g., The Kintsugi Collective 2021, 2019), we rethink how practicing human resource development professionals can realistically bring about constructive changes in and through their everyday working lives by engaging in micro-practices that enable restorative repair. We see repair as “not outside of dominant governing regimes and practices, but shaped by them” (Graziano and Trogal, 2019:

203–204). Thus, rather than throwing out a broken object or system, repair involves creating practices that enable the imagining and careful nurturing of different scenarios and relations.

The imaginative possibilities of such restorative micro-repair practices are anchored in our sense of place embodied by our collective, which we have named the ‘Kintsugi Collective’, inspired by the Japanese practice of repairing broken crockery using golden glue, making the repaired piece more beautiful than the original by virtue of, and not despite, its cracks.

Our agenda is to share our experiences and experiments as a scholarly collective to inspire others wishing to ‘repair’ their own workspaces. Our exemplar is grounded within academia, but the dimensions of our journey have resonance in any workspace. In this chapter, we use autoethnographic inspiration to describe the spontaneous unfolding of the relational process that is our collective, which we believe is enabling us to cultivate such practices of modest repair which facilitate humane workspaces.

To this end, our contribution is to offer restorative micro-repair as a means to forge reconnections within CHRD practice. Through reflecting on the unfolding of our journey we have identified some cornerstones for this type of alternative practice. These include the development of loose *structures* that enable divergent thinking and practices, an attention to group *processes* and an emphasis on *communality* through a relational, community-based approach. In telling the formation story of our own restorative micro-repair space, we set the stage to reflect upon how these cornerstones can serve to help others engage in micro-repair practices to reconnect to one another.

Collaborative Autoethnography – Writing Our Story to Illuminate Repair

In recounting our experiences as a means to illuminate how others may practice repair, we engage in a collective form of autoethnography (Grenier, 2015; Tienari and Taylor, 2019). Our reflections on our own processes of repair serve to reinforce the identity we have

created in this space we call the Kintsugi Collective. The collective is comprised of eight scholars at different stages of our careers (from PhD student to Professor) and hailing from multiple international backgrounds (American, Danish, English, and Israeli). Our common search for repair provided the contextualization for our reflections that enabled us to interpret our collective personal experiences (Chang, 2013) of micro-repair within neoliberal spaces.

Our interpretation and analyses took place through a series of dialogic processes (Padilla, 1993 as cited in Murakami-Ramalho, et al., 2008). Over the period of two years, we had five, two- to three-day retreats to develop and reflect upon our collective identity and purpose. The first was when we met at an ‘unconference’ in St Andrews, Scotland. We held two meetings in Copenhagen, Denmark and a meeting in Chester, England. Our fifth meeting was in Glasgow, Scotland. A sixth meeting was planned for Durham, England, when the global Covid-19 pandemic derailed our in-person meetings. At these meetings, we had individual and small group reflections and the full group came together to dialogue, capture our reflections in collectively written “field notes”, and derive meaning and themes from the reflections.

In this chapter, we share the story of how we set out to repair ourselves, and how we discovered the ways in which our own micro-repair practices can serve as both catalyst and model for others to change the way they conceptualize work in a neo-liberal context. We incorporate two styles of autoethnographic writing (Chang, 2013). We use a descriptive-realist style, telling collectively crafted stories of our experiences, to provide the foundation for an analytic-interpretive approach to discuss the meaning of those experiences.

The Unfolding

We gathered in a historic building at St Andrews University on a sunny summer’s day in 2018 to attend an ‘unconference’. Most of us were not sure what to expect, but we had submitted ideas of papers we were working on with the hopes of progressing those works to

further our own publication agendas. The unconference presented a visage of playing by the rules of the game, while simultaneously violating them. It created a space for open-ended, divergent thinking and experimentation, collective and relation-driven innovation, and an emphasis on process rather than outputs. In doing so, the unconference moved us away from reflecting on our own performative publication projects and toward a reflection upon our practices that facilitate ‘repairing’ broken workplaces.

Unconferences present a free space for thinking about, and discussing, broad issues together with no obligation to end up with a ‘product’. These broad discussions make it easier to connect with colleagues in a more collaborative and less instrumental or performative way. This broad focus, and permissiveness of meandering dialogue, is radical as it subverts systemic pressure towards focused and effective ‘product development’. The discussion-based format also subverts conventional conference structure in several ways: it enables in-depth, lengthy discussion and free elaboration of ideas that are still embryonic; it alters the whole nature of ‘feedback’ at a conference; and it does not foreground individuals’ contributions. The lack of keynote speakers or sub-group leaders lends itself to a lack of hierarchy, giving each participant an equal voice at the outset. This de-hierarchization embedded within the unconference facilitated our lack of awareness of the structural inequalities of our own group, which made it that much easier for us to simply value the expertise and insight we each brought to the table without looking for a positional authority (Horton et al., 1997). However, as a participant-driven conference, the dynamics differ from year to year, depending on the space and how participants interact in it.

At the unconference, we found ourselves in a large group discussing academic activism. Due to the ethos of our setting, we wanted to continue the conversation, to see how it could be translated into practice beyond the unconference, but we did not yet know how. In hindsight, the ‘how’ developed organically through email and video conference exchanges

between meetings; a commitment by all members to at least three face-to-face meetings per year rotating across our respective countries; and maintaining the ethos in our meeting formats. With this in mind, our cornerstones of practice - *structure, process, and communality* - emerged.

Structure

As scholars of learning, we know that the context in which learning is situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is significant for the development of a creative and collaborative learning environment. We did not articulate the spatial constraints that frustrated our, and others' learning, during our first conversations at the unconference. But the attention we have paid to our use of space and place are inherent to our collective practice.

Metaphors of space infuse performance management structures that constrain us. The loose structures that shape our discussions were formed during our first meeting and continue to characterize how we work together. We were drawn together because we were intrigued by the idea of how we might repair academia from within. Our teaching and research is 'ranked' against hierarchies of judgement which individualize learning and research activities to fragment (Alakavuklar, 2017) the potential for collective inquiry. Our practice is designed to work toward meaningful engagement in the moment, in a way that is inclusive, collaborative and creative. We take joy in working together, but recognize that when eight people are immersed in a creative process we need a loose structure to act as a container (Vince, 2002) for our thinking.

Individually and collectively we have occasionally reflected on how the pressure to perform academia as a series of measurable outputs infiltrates our thoughts when we are together. During our third meeting we discussed our progress in working towards our goals. Our long-term agenda is not marked by a series of dates against which 'X' task needs to be completed, yet some of us felt a little uneasy about our progress in creating the artifacts of

our practice. This has caused us to reflect on how we can become conditioned to measure the value of our work against a timetable defined by others.

Part of our commitment to restorative repair involves continually experimenting with the way we spend time together. Some of our first moments as a group were spent unsettling the established boundaries of the conference by sitting on the grass talking, and walking together to buy coffee and ice cream. These informal spaces have influenced our learning, and their informality is a way to work from within and protect us from the glare of public performance before we were ready to present.

When we did begin to present our work, our repair practices took the form of unsettling conference rituals in order to create structures that enabled divergent thinking. Academic conferences are ritualized ceremonies that socialize members into the academic community (Egri, 1992) and thus serve to reproduce the neoliberal culture of academe (Nicolson, 2017). Academic conferences tend to organize with strict agendas, predetermined content, fixed streams, and planned PowerPoint presentations. Thus, although organization and management conferences—particularly critical or alternative ones—purport to problematize and question existing ways of organizing and to foster alternatives, this conventional, ritualistic way of organizing persists. Our forays into participation as a Collective disrupted such assumptions of conference structure with a view to ‘repairing’ them in the sense of prompting people to stop up and reflect critically on the often dehumanizing conference ritual itself.

For example, in one interactive session at a conference, we simulated the relentless pressure of pursuing grant opportunities by having a Collective member ‘accept’ a phone call from a prospective funder in the middle of a presentation; the other two presenters continued with the workshop as if this were ‘normal’. At the end of the presentation, we asked participants to place themselves on one side of the room if they agreed these were ‘acts of

activism’ and on the other side if they disagreed. The facilitated groups then discussed the characteristics, aims, and methods of academic activism.

That violation produced resistance, with some participants questioning the legitimacy of the way in which we unsettled the conventional paper-presentation format. On the one hand, this shows that such micro-repair practices risk being seen as irrelevant ‘noise’. On the other hand, it is precisely by relating to what is already there instead of dissociating oneself from it that enables micro-repair acts to succeed in facilitating change.

Process

Organizing in ways that promote loose structures and collective focus can seemingly contribute to disrupting the salience of outputs such as articles or challenging the means by which they are typically measured (e.g., ranked at ‘2 stars’ or above). Here, our interactions have been characterized by a collective curiosity about being together in a longer-term compassionate process rather than by tightly specified goals accompanied by a highly specified plan of action for delivering outputs which would be recognized and rewarded in our respective contexts. As such, this apparent acceptance of ambiguity and indeterminacy regarding tangible deliverables contradicts typical academic practices often associated with tenure and promotion (MacIntosh et al., 2017).

Initial indications of such dynamics repeatedly appeared during the unconference. On one occasion, early into the unconference, we noticed how a small group of our original formation had splintered and had mapped out the chapters for a new book. We shared our curiosity around the intentionality and tactics of this smaller group, which seemed to function as a way of us sharing - or even asserting - our values around inclusion and inclusive practice. Similarly, on another occasion towards the end of the unconference, one of the facilitators indicated it was ‘time to start thinking about your variables.’ Despite this attempt to move participants towards more precise action and planning for new research studies, we were still

sharing our stories of what connected us (or not). We were not ready to finalize our thinking; we were busy creating our sense of place by enjoying, exploring, and learning ‘who we are’ together. We have held strongly to this ‘time lingering’ approach as an antidote to the “punishing intensification of work” (Gill, 2016: 46) as it enables us to ‘dwell’ in intellectual processes rather than be slaves to outcomes (The Kintsugi Collective, forthcoming).

Instead, as a collective, we seek to ‘change time’ by experimenting with alternative ways of thinking about, and practicing, time in our work. Although potentially risky given the target driven metrics we are evaluated by, we believe that, done consciously, it can be a powerful way to prioritize and reclaim relationships and offer a sense of pleasure, meaningfulness, and purpose in our work. To that end, we unsettle the short-term, goal-oriented nature of our work by resisting the urge to formulate and work towards specific goals. We allow ourselves to be steered by curiosity about what might emerge if we accompany one another, without haste, in a longer-term intellectual process. We spend time at each meeting engaged in social and collegial dialogue, sharing personal updates and inspiring readings and experiences. Our scholarly products are consistently a consequence of our time lingering, intellectual dwelling with one another, not a conscious goal. This acceptance of ambiguity and indeterminacy regarding tangible deliverables runs counter to typical contemporary practices in academe (MacIntosh et al., 2017) and elsewhere.

This unsettling of traditional practice extends to our process of writing. Academic writing is usually a solitary process, even when collaboratively authored. Our collective writing approach similarly reflects the value placed on process rather than the delivery of highly efficient and effective written outputs. The approach involves a person typing into a document projected onto a large screen so others can request revisions or make suggestions to enhance the text. Revisions are made until we all agree with the text or until we can accommodate what has been produced within the time together (some polishing may happen

outside of our time together). The approach is analogous to co-crafting a piece of art that simultaneously has all of us within it (we have all contributed to its creation), but also none of us (as discernible individuals).

We continue to return to a line of inquiry raised at one of our first meetings - our identity and purpose - as we felt it important in guiding the form of our work together moving forward. The statement we wrote together reflected a processual orientation of being. Not only was this co-created, once again accepting ambiguity and indeterminacy, it was also agreed as being a loose container for our work which was subject to change at some future, unknown point. It embodied and celebrated 'the processual' in contrast to the demands of contemporary academic life to be clear cut, and efficiently and effectively managed for ultimate productivity. It codified the heterotopic space that forms our collective sense of place regardless of our locale.

Communality

With our loose structure and processual focus guiding the intent of our work, we take time to begin every meeting with an open conversation about what is on our minds, on our desks and in our lives to re-create the shape of our working space as constructive and connected. We actively seek practices that develop our ability and willingness to share and embrace vulnerability. At our meetings together, we have supported one another with celebration for a birthday, a promotion, a birth, and with sadness for a death. These often invisible and unacknowledged moments of sharing have enabled us to tap into emotions that bond us.

We recognized early that food is a "recipe for friendship" (Woolley and Fishbach, 2017: 1), and this recognition emerged as we resisted conference structures and expectations to work at certain places and times. We risked ire from the unconference facilitators for returning late to a session because we opted to go for coffee and ice cream at a local hotspot.

Sharing food with one another is “the very stuff of sociality [that is] in danger of disappearing” (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo, 1992 as cited in Fischler, 2011: 529). The danger, Fischler (2011) concludes, is due to the individualization of work processes that are the very focus of our restorative repair practices.

Our academic context conspires against our ability to generate ways of caring and human contact (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2016). In response, we take both a collective and individual restorative micro-repair approach to prefigure the kind of workplace we hope to experience. First, we seek to work collectively and in flexible constellations within our group. Second, we build caring into our electronic communications by the way we close our emails.

In our collective and flexible micro-repair work practices, we celebrate the golden threads that join our passions and create a sense of place together. The security of such a place gives us freedom within space; the “quality of place is that it has the power to order and to focus human intentions, experiences and actions spatially” (Seamon and Sowers, 2008: 44). The Kintsugi Collective has become our sense of place, regardless of the space in which we find ourselves; and we privilege that place in the way we engage in our micro-repair practices. In one of our most significant repair micro-acts, we write with collective authorship, randomly listing names of contributing members in the acknowledgements. This rejection of individualization of academic performance and performativity takes courage, and indeed has resulted in skepticism from some editors.

As individuals, we have adopted a more mindful approach to closing our emails that generates caring and compassion in ourselves and, we hope, our readers. As we have noted previously (The Kintsugi Collective, 2021), email can be depersonalizing, in particular within a context of bureaucratic expectations and time pressures. Both writing and receiving emails is increasingly fraught with anxiety within academe (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018). The micro-repair practices we enact here are intended to intervene in the anxiety by finding ways to

close our emails with caring, compassion, and, indeed, love, at the forefront of our minds. We do this by consciously and manually typing “love”, “warm regards”, “with kindness”, and so forth. This intentional act is a form of resistance against the ‘emptiness’ and impersonal character of automated signature blocks and their symbolic resonance to the masculinized hyper-efficiency of the contemporary workplace.

Summary

We began our journey inspired by the loose structure of the unconference. Our process emerged as we attempted to create a collective sense of place within the spaces defined by the unconference meeting structure. The resulting relational and community-based way of being and working infuses each of our changing meeting spaces with a sense of place (Gurian, 2001) that enables us to celebrate the golden threads that join us. We believe that these three cornerstones of our restorative micro-repair practice - namely an emphasis on *structure*, *process*, and *communality* - are the transferable threads that others can use to keep the spirit of such unconferences alive.

Moving forward: elements of restorative micro-repair...and risk

In this relatively traditional piece of academic communication, we have presented what we believe constitutes the cornerstone of our own search for an alternative vision of academic practice: a) loose structures, b) a process orientation, and c) a relational, community-based approach. Our intention is not to offer a one-size-fits-all model for ‘fixing’ academia or to pave the way for a return to some kind of nostalgic academe—or any other type of institution. Rather, our aim has been to share our collective experiences and experiments with displacing ourselves from the instrumentalized, individualized and output-oriented structures that currently pervade academic life. Like in the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, this is about treating the breakage of our workplaces as an opportunity to modestly create something even lovelier than the original. From the enactment of different dimensions

emerges a space that enables divergent rather than convergent thinking and within which we collaborate rather than compete. We argue that even though this space is process-focused rather than output-focused, one happy consequence is that it results in a range of conventional (for us, academic) outputs.

This is important since we are not searching for a quiet, safe space where we can be left alone with self-centered academic navel-gazing. We *do* wish to disperse our research so that it can make an impact on society; and we do find that academia has something to offer that makes it worth repairing. However, if academic work is to be relevant to beyond satisfying neoliberal performance management systems, we need to continually test the boundaries established by such systems by being simultaneously disobedient and reflexive. As we have suggested, this is not (necessarily) a matter of refusing to play by the rules of the game. Rather, it is, as we noted earlier, about contesting the rules of the game while playing it. It is this contestation that promises reward, whilst embodying risk. Unsurprisingly, these risks are inherent within the neoliberal system that we seek to disrupt. The three greatest limitations we see to the restorative micro-repair approach we propose include performativity, invisibility, and prudence.

In many ways, the micro-repair practices we engage in undermine us within the current context of a performative academia; we are challenged by individual performance measures and increasing work intensification constrains our time. We risk being ensnared into performing in a conventional way to preserve our careers and our dedication to micro-repair practices involves a conscious sacrifice for each of us.

We also risk invisibility. Our alternative form of organizing as a collective resists and obscures the prized neoliberal individualism (Keshtiban et al., 2021). We face the critique that privileging the collective is irresponsible for our early career scholars who feel compelled to ‘make a name’ for themselves as individuals; that their contribution becomes

invisible when it is embedded in the collective. We also risk that gatekeeping structures and power brokers will refuse to acknowledge or recognize us as a collective subject, rendering us invisible.

Finally, our need to be prudent fiscally and physically became more apparent during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Originally, our concerns were that limited funding would constrain our ability to meet as desired (3-4 times per year), attend conferences to disseminate our work, and hold and attend workshops that enrich our learning and engagement. This concern remains. But the physical risks of such travel and collegial gatherings were heightened as a result of the pandemic. As travel restrictions began to be lifted, we planned to meet in person in Durham, England, but those plans were dashed when another surge of the virus demanded prudence in traveling. While we held virtual meetings, we found that these short bursts of a few random hours failed to produce the dimensions of structure, process, and communality that made our in-person retreats so meaningful.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we described the unfolding of a scholarly collective triggered by an unconference and its ideas about organic and participant-driven organization. In the early process of becoming a collective searching for alternative spaces within academia, our work has predominantly focused on challenging the working conditions within academia. However, this has fuelled a more general collective interest in the concept of restorative micro-repair that might find relevance also in settings outside academia.

Those beyond academe will find resonance for relating restorative micro-repair practices to wellbeing in the workplace (The Kintsugi Collective, 2021). Our practice of disrupting the efficient, yet cold, standardized signature block by adding a manually typed message of warmth and compassion to our recipient is relevant for anyone. Socializing with colleagues over lunch is being re-discovered as an important factor in improving employee

wellbeing and productivity (Corvo et al., 2020). Our struggle with recreating the meaningfulness of structure, process, and communality in virtual meetings is something that all organizations now face; as the pandemic has normalized virtual meetings and working from home, organizations must grapple with the implications and trade-offs of virtual working. Finally, encouraging the collective over the rugged individual in practice and policy is something organizations can explore: what networks are available to employees, how are employees assessed, what spaces are available for encouraging collaboration whilst maintaining spaces for privacy?

Moving our collective forward, we will use our experiences with modest micro-repair practices within our own work in academia as steppingstones for exploring the concept of micro-repair in contexts outside academia in order to contribute to furthering the understanding and creation of spaces for repair. With this agenda, we hope to inspire others toward ‘doing’ their work differently. For academics like us and many of those reading this chapter, we aspire to letting academia and academic knowledge ‘act’ differently and creating valuable impact in the broadest sense.

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