Research Article

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Navigating Epistemological Borders: A Reflective Autoethnography of Postgraduate Supervision in Transnational Contexts

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Abstract: This autoethnographic study investigates the epistemological transitions encountered by an international postgraduate student within South African higher education institutions, with a specific focus on how these transitions influence transformative supervision practices. Drawing upon my personal trajectory from primary school teaching in Nigeria to doctoral studies in South Africa, I analyse the complex cognitive, cultural, and pedagogical shifts inherent in traversing educational borders. The study utilises solo autoethnography as a methodological framework, employing retrospective narrative analysis to critically examine experiences related to academic writing development, supervisory relationships, and identity transformation. Theoretically, the research is anchored in academic literacies theory, communities of practice, border crossing and third space theory, as well as decolonial perspectives on postgraduate supervision. Through thematic analysis of my lived experiences, I delineate two critical epistemological transitions: from technical accuracy to critical reflexivity and the shift from certainty to scholarly uncertainty. The findings indicate that effective supervision in transnational contexts necessitates cultural competence, explicit acknowledgement of students' pre-existing knowledge systems, and the establishment of dialogic spaces in which epistemological dissonance can be navigated productively. I propose a framework for transformative supervision that honours students' existing expertise while scaffolding their development of new scholarly identities. This study contributes insider perspectives that are rarely captured in the supervision literature and offers practical implications for supervisors working with international students who are navigating epistemological transitions in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Autoethnography, academic literacies, epistemological transitions, postgraduate supervision, reflection, transnational education.

1. Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has resulted in increasingly diverse postgraduate student populations, particularly within South African universities, which attract students from across the African continent and beyond (Ramchander, 2021). These students bring with them rich educational backgrounds, professional expertise, and cultural knowledge, which should constitute valuable assets to scholarly communities. However, many international postgraduate students encounter profound epistemological challenges as they navigate the transition from their prior educational contexts to the demands of advanced academic inquiry within new institutional environments (Bodiat, 2024; Luneta et al., 2024). These challenges extend beyond mere linguistic proficiency or technical writing skills; they involve fundamental shifts in how knowledge is constructed, validated, and communicated within academic discourse communities.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of culturally responsive supervision, much of the existing literature on postgraduate supervision in South Africa approaches these issues from institutional or pedagogical perspectives, with limited attention devoted to the lived experiences of students undergoing these transitions (Joubert & Clarence, 2024). This gap is particularly significant

given South Africa's unique position as both an African nation and a major destination for continental postgraduate students, situated at the intersection of multiple educational traditions, colonial legacies, and contemporary transformation agendas (Ndebele, 2024). The epistemological transitions experienced by international students in this context are shaped by broader geopolitical, historical, and cultural dynamics that influence what is considered legitimate knowledge in various educational spaces. The concept of epistemological transitions refers to the fundamental shifts in modes of knowing, thinking, and engaging with knowledge that students must navigate as they move between educational contexts (Thao & Trut Thuy, 2024). For international postgraduate students, these transitions are often compounded by cultural displacement, linguistic challenges, and the necessity to negotiate between home and host academic cultures while maintaining intellectual integrity and personal authenticity.

South African higher education institutions occupy a distinctive position within the global academic landscape. Shaped by the country's complex history of colonialism, apartheid, and ongoing transformation efforts, these institutions are sites of both epistemological tension and productive possibility (Nguyen et al., 2019). The post-apartheid era has witnessed concerted efforts to decolonise curricula, diversify knowledge systems, and create more inclusive academic environments (Ndebele, 2024). However, tensions persist between inherited colonial academic traditions, contemporary pressures towards internationalisation, and indigenous African knowledge systems that have historically been marginalised within formal higher education (Pape et al., 2023). For international students arriving at South African universities, this epistemological complexity presents both challenges and opportunities. The specific instantiation of academic conventions varies significantly across national contexts, and what constitutes 'good' academic writing, appropriate critical engagement, or legitimate knowledge claims differs substantially between, for instance, Nigerian, Kenyan, and South African academic cultures (Lubombo, 2022).

My own trajectory exemplifies these complex transitions. After five years as a primary school teacher in Nigeria, where I taught children the fundamentals of writing with emphasis on technical accuracy, grammatical correctness, and structural clarity, I embarked on master's and doctoral studies at a South African university. This transition constituted a profound epistemological rupture that challenged my fundamental assumptions about what constitutes good writing, legitimate knowledge, and scholarly expertise. The pedagogical certainty I had cultivated in my Nigerian classroom proved inadequate when confronted with supervisory expectations for critical reflexivity, theoretical sophistication, and scholarly uncertainty. This autoethnographic study emerges from a conviction that my personal experience illuminates broader patterns and challenges that warrant systematic scholarly attention.

This study presents several significant contributions to the field. Firstly, it offers insider perspectives on epistemological transitions that are seldom represented in the existing literature on supervision. Secondly, through the utilisation of autoethnography, the study highlights the value of reflexive and experiential knowledge in shaping pedagogical practice. Thirdly, the specific focus on the Nigeria-South Africa educational corridor addresses a notable gap in the literature, which has predominantly centred on Global North-South educational transitions, often neglecting South-South and intra-African educational mobility. Finally, by linking personal narrative to established theoretical frameworks, the research provides practical implications for supervisors working with international students, while also contributing to broader scholarly discussions concerning the decolonisation of postgraduate education and the creation of more inclusive academic communities.

2. Methodology

This study employs solo autoethnography, a qualitative research approach that utilises the researcher's own experiences as primary data for investigating cultural and social phenomena (Tarisayi, 2023). By examining my epistemological transitions through the dual lenses of participant

and analyst, I aim to generate insights that could inform more culturally responsive supervision practices within South African higher education contexts. Autoethnography is particularly appropriate because epistemological transitions are inherently subjective, experiential phenomena that are difficult to capture through traditional empirical methods (du Toit, 2025). As an individual who has navigated the educational corridor from Nigeria to South Africa, I possess insider knowledge that is challenging for external researchers to access. Autoethnography also aligns with commitments to epistemological justice by validating experiential knowledge and centring historically marginalised voices in supervision literature (Tarisayi, 2023). By foregrounding the lived experiences of an international student navigating between Nigerian and South African educational systems, this study contributes to broadening the epistemological range of supervision research beyond dominant Western perspectives. However, participatory observation through autoethnography is not without limitations. Key weaknesses include the potential for researcher bias, as the proximity between the researcher and the research subject may compromise objectivity. The highly subjective nature of autoethnographic data raises concerns regarding generalisability, as findings rooted in individual experiences may not translate to broader populations (Araújo & Davel, 2024). Furthermore, the reliance on memory and retrospective reflection can introduce inaccuracies or selective recall. To mitigate these limitations, I complemented my experiential accounts with peer validation, critical self-reflexivity, and triangulation with existing literature, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The primary data comprises documented evidence from my doctoral journey (2021 to 2024), including proposals, chapter drafts with supervisor feedback, email exchanges, and personal journals, aligning with document-based autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Bohnsack et al. (2010) assert that documentary analysis reveals patterns of cultural socialisation and identity formation. The analytical process involved iterative stages: free writing about doctoral experiences, identifying recurring themes and critical incidents, engaging in dialogic analysis by questioning interpretations, and situating the personal narrative within existing scholarship. This approach combines analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) with evocative autoethnography's emphasis on emotional truth (Bochner & Ellis, 2022). As a Nigerian doctoral candidate in South Africa, I occupy multiple positionalities: international student, African scholar navigating Western academic conventions, and former teacher transitioning to researcher. My current status as a successful doctorate holder influences retrospective interpretation, risking the obscuration of students who experience more profound alienation.

This study acknowledges that as a single participant study, it cannot claim empirical generalisability. However, autoethnography aspires to "naturalistic generalisation" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:751), enabling readers to connect findings to their own contexts. To enhance trustworthiness, I employed methodological triangulation, maintained reflexivity throughout, provided rich contextual descriptions, sought peer validation from fellow international doctoral students, and maintained transparency by acknowledging limitations and alternative interpretations. Although this study draws solely on the researcher's own experiences as data, it is situated within a broader doctoral research project that was subject to formal ethical review. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee under approval number IREC 249/22. The ethical clearance governing the doctoral study extends to this work, ensuring that the research was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards. Throughout the study, ongoing ethical reflexivity was maintained with attention to vulnerability, fair representation, and potential impact on others featured in the narrative.

3. Autoethnographic Narrative and Analysis

This section presents a thematic analysis of my epistemological journey from teaching in Nigerian primary schools to pursuing doctoral studies in South Africa. This analysis is organised around two

interconnected transitions: from technical accuracy to critical reflexivity, and from certainty to scholarly uncertainty. Each theme is elaborated through narrative vignettes that illuminate significant moments of transition, followed by an analytical interpretation that draws on the theoretical frameworks outlined previously.

3.1 First border: From technical accuracy to critical reflexivity

This section examines the epistemological shift required when transitioning from primary school teaching in Nigeria to doctoral research in South Africa. Two interconnected subthemes illuminate this border crossing. First, I reflect on red pen pedagogy and the illusion that technical correctness equates to research readiness. Second, I analyse the differing epistemological underpinnings that govern pedagogical practice in Nigerian primary education and doctoral scholarship in South African academia. Together, these subthemes reveal how my expertise as a teacher, grounded in error correction and surface-level accuracy, proved insufficient for doctoral writing, which demands critical engagement and reflexive inquiry.

3.1.1 Reflections on red pen pedagogy and the illusion of proposal readiness

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead in my Nigerian classroom, casting harsh white light onto rows of small wooden desks. I moved between them with purpose, red pen in hand, scanning learners' exercise books with the practiced efficiency of five years' teaching experience. As a primary school English language teacher, my colleagues joked that I could spot a grammatical error from across the room, and I wore this reputation proudly. Good writing meant proper punctuation, correct spelling, and clear structure—quantifiable marks of quality I could teach, assess, and celebrate.

> "*Favour, you have forgotten your capital letter here*" (Researcher, 2015).

> "*Matthew, this sentence runs on, where should the full stop go?*" (Researcher, 2015).

I would note, circling the offending lowercase letter. My feedback, as outlined above, was specific, actionable, and directive. Learners knew exactly what I expected, and with effort, they could meet those expectations. When parents asked about their children's progress, I could produce tangible evidence such as decreasing error counts, improving test scores, and increasingly neat handwriting. This pedagogy felt empowering for my learners, who saw clear pathways to success, and for me, possessing expertise I could confidently deploy. This approach was not idiosyncratic but reflected the priorities of the Nigerian primary education system. Shaped by British colonial educational structures and subsequent post-independence emphases on standardised testing and measurable learning outcomes, Nigerian primary education cherishes technical correctness as foundational literacy (Aliyu & Olatunji, 2024). Given large class sizes, limited resources, and examination-driven curricula, this emphasis serves pragmatic purposes. It enables efficient assessment and provides learners with marketable skills in contexts where English proficiency opens economic opportunities. I taught what I had been taught, perpetuating a pedagogical lineage that, whatever its limitations, had produced generations of literate Nigerians.

Fast forward to 2021, when the COVID-19 regulations were still in place. I was requested by my supervisors to send my draft proposal via email so they could gain an idea of what my doctoral study was about. I had laboured over the document for weeks, ensuring every citation conformed perfectly to DUT Harvard referencing style, every paragraph followed a clear topic-sentence-support-conclusion structure, and every sentence was grammatically flawless. I sent the proposal draft with confidence born of the same expertise that had served me well in my Nigerian classroom. The feedback came back after a few days; it began with what felt like surface-level concerns. Supervisor B's first comment addressed something I had considered merely stylistic.

> "*You don't need to state in-text reference in a summary of your proposal. This is like an abstract in which in-text citations are not allowed*" (Supervisor B, 2021).

I had meticulously included citations even in the summary section, believing this demonstrated scholarly rigour. Supervisor B's correction revealed my misunderstanding of genre conventions within academic writing. However, more fundamental challenges emerged as I read Supervisor A's response, which seemed measured, even gentle, but challenged my core assumptions.

> "*Say how you are going to do this (methodology)*" he noted repeatedly throughout the margins (Supervisor A, 2021).

I had described what I intended to study, but had failed to articulate the methodological frameworks that would guide my inquiry. This distinction between content and method, between what and how, had not featured prominently in my prior educational experience. The critique deepened when Supervisor A's comment cut through my carefully constructed sections:

"*From the discussion of the sections below, you have not really shown why this topic is important for PhD research. The discussion is too shallow*" (Supervisor B, 2021).

At this point, I stared at my proposal, genuinely confused. I had provided context, cited relevant literature, and outlined objectives. "*But there are no errors,*" I wanted to protest. "*How can it not be good?*" Yet Supervisor B continued:

> "*I also did not see language elements in the discussion provided. Why is the focus on African language? You need to discuss why technology teaching in African languages or languages generally is important, as some of the justifications of the choice of the focus of this study*" (Supervisor B, 2021).

The feedback provided above illuminated a gap that I had not previously recognised. I had assumed that articulating my research focus clearly was adequate. However, the expectation that I must justify, advocate for, and theoretically substantiate each choice uncovered an epistemological orientation that is fundamentally different from my teaching practice, in which curriculum objectives were typically prescribed rather than interrogated. Supervisor A introduced additional layers of complexity:

> "*The research problem is not clear. Your research problem should come from the gap you have identified and intend to fill with your study*" (Supervisor A, 2021).

I had written objectives and research questions, believing that they constituted adequate problem articulation. However, my supervisors' insistence on explicitly identifying gaps in existing literature and positioning my study within scholarly conversations highlighted expectations I had not anticipated. As Kamler and Thomson (2014) observe, doctoral students often struggle to move from describing their research interests to articulating scholarly problems that warrant investigation, a transition that requires a different epistemological positioning. The feedback on my literature review proved particularly disorienting. Supervisor B noted that:

> "*The literature review needs to be rewritten. Literature review is where you discuss existing literature and show what is lacking in the literature as a space your study needs to occupy*" (Supervisor B, 2021).

I understood a literature review as a comprehensive coverage of relevant studies, summarising what scholars had said about my topic. The expectation that I should critique, evaluate, and identify limitations in this literature demanded a relationship to published scholarship that was fundamentally different from the reverential stance I had developed. Supervisor A's comment reinforced this, as he pointed out that:

> "*There is no need to write history or background of a study. State the findings of the study that are relevant to yours. Please refer to the literature of a good article to see how a literature review is written*" (Supervisor A, 2021).

I had devoted considerable space to describing the historical development and methodological approaches of the cited studies in the literature review, believing this demonstrated thorough engagement. However, the supervisors wanted an analytical synthesis focused on the findings and their implications for my research, highlighting a distinction between different purposes for engaging with scholarly literature (Boote & Beile, 2005). Perhaps most fundamentally, Supervisor B questioned my entire methodological approach. He stated that:

> "*Check your sources very well. Your discussion here looks like that of qualitative approach... Are you sure quantitative method is good for this study. You haven't provided justification for the use of quantitative method?*" Supervisor B, 2021).

What I had done in the methodology section was select quantitative methods partly because they felt familiar, manageable, and aligned with the technical precision I valued. Supervisor B's challenge demanded that I justify my methodological choices based on their appropriateness for the research questions rather than personal comfort or assumed rigour. The supervisors also identified numerous instances where my writing lacked coherence or analytical depth. Supervisor B noted:

> "*This sentence is awkward. Rephrase*" and "*Your sentences are too long and therefore difficult to understand. Two- or three-lines sentence is better*" (Supervisor B, 2021).

Supervisor A observed:

> "*Rephrase. The use of 'aware' and 'abundant' are not appropriate here*" and "*You cannot have a paragraph of a single sentence with no supporting sentences*" (Supervisor A, 2021).

These comments revealed that technical correctness, my primary criterion for quality, was insufficient. Academic writing, especially at the doctoral level, demanded rhetorical sophistication, appropriate register, coherent argumentation, and strategic paragraph development (Swales & Feak, 2012). At this point, I closed my laptop feeling disoriented, even slightly betrayed. The rules had changed, but nobody had informed me. In my Nigerian educational experience as an English teacher, mastery meant the correct application of established conventions. Suddenly, I was expected to critique those conventions, position myself as an authority capable of judging the adequacy of established theories, and develop a 'voice' — a concept I barely understood.

The subsequent rounds of feedback intensified this dissonance. After submitting a revised proposal, Supervisor A wrote:

> "*I would prefer to have the conceptual/theoretical framework as the last part of the literature review*" and "*This should be embedded in the literature that you discuss, especially in your 'context' and 'research problem' sections*" (Supervisor A, 2021).

These structural expectations reflected epistemological assumptions about the relationship between theory, literature, and research problems that remained unclear to me. His comment on my theoretical framework was particularly challenging:

> "*You need a subsection on the use of technology in teaching and learning African languages. I am sure that there is some literature, no matter how limited, in this area*" (Supervisor A, 2021).

I had believed that comprehensive literature searching meant finding readily available sources. However, the expectation that I should actively seek out marginal or limited literature within specific intersections of my topic required different search strategies and a level of persistence I had not cultivated (Booth et al., 2016). This realisation prompted me to move beyond reliance on dominant databases and mainstream journals. I began to employ techniques such as citation chaining, where references within key articles led to earlier foundational work, and forward citation tracking, which revealed more recent studies building upon established research. Grey literature, including conference proceedings, theses, and policy documents, became particularly valuable for uncovering perspectives and findings that had not reached traditional publication channels. These sources often

provided context-specific insights and alternative methodological approaches that enriched my understanding of underexplored areas within my research domain.

3.1.2 Epistemological underpinnings

This transition illuminates fundamental differences in epistemological assumptions between educational contexts. My Nigerian primary pedagogy operated within what Lea and Street (1998) term the study skills model, where writing is conceptualised as a transferable technical skill taught through explicit instruction. This aligns with behaviourist learning theories, which emphasise skill acquisition through reinforcement (Skinner, 2012). Doctoral education, in general, operates within Lea and Street's (2006) academic literacies model, conceptualising writing as a negotiation of disciplinary epistemologies and identity construction. This requires rhetorical awareness, theoretical sophistication, and what Barnett (1997) terms epistemic reflexivity, that is, the capacity to critically examine one's own knowledge claims. My experience in the South African context revealed these complexities particularly acutely, as I navigated between the Nigerian primary pedagogical foundations and doctoral-level expectations.

The supervisory feedback revealed these differing expectations. When Supervisor B insisted that I demonstrate "why this topic is important for PhD research," he demanded a different epistemological stance. Doctoral writing requires what Kamler and Thomson (2016) describe as 'creating a research space': positioning one's work within scholarly conversations and arguing for its significance. When Supervisor A noted, "Your research problem should come from the gap you have identified," he articulated doctoral scholarship's core convention: research problems must emerge from critical engagement with literature (Boote & Beile, 2005). From a community of practice perspective (Wenger, 1998), my Nigerian teaching inducted me into a community where engagement centred on error correction, and the shared repertoire consisted of grammar rules and structural conventions. This epistemology privileged clarity, correctness, and conformity (Aliyu & Olatunji, 2024). The South African doctoral community operated with different patterns: dialogic critique, theoretical contribution, and scholarly argumentation genres. The supervisors' requests to "rephrase," "elaborate," and "justify" reflected norms valuing explicit reasoning over surface correctness (Aitchison & Lee, 2006).

This dissonance reflects what Grimm (2024) describes as navigating between communities with incommensurate norms. I experienced alienating transitionality, where I seemed trapped between worlds, my expertise suddenly invalidated (Ramchander, 2021). Reflexivity, the capacity to turn analytical attention onto one's assumptions, is privileged within Western academic traditions (Finlay, 2002) but is not universally valued across cultures (Chilisa, 2019). When my supervisor critiqued my theoretical framework, noting, "You need to read Bourdieu well, and not focus on secondary sources" (Supervisor A, 2021), he articulated expectations about engaging directly with primary texts. This reflects an academic culture that appreciates theoretical mastery, a value not universally shared where practical knowledge may hold greater currency (Bernstein, 2000). By positioning reflexivity as necessary for doctoral work, South African academic culture privileges certain ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2013). From a decolonial perspective, this transition raises questions about power and knowledge. When international students are told their writing lacks critical depth, is this legitimate feedback or epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)—a dismissal of non-Western knowledge practices? However, the supervisors' feedback was an induction into established scholarly practices with legitimate purposes. As Lillis (2014) argues, academic literacies are gatekeeping mechanisms that exclude but also enable participation in knowledge-generating communities.

3.2 Second border: From certainty to scholarly uncertainty

This section traces the epistemological transformation required as I moved from valuing definitiveness and completeness to accepting the provisional and iterative nature of scholarly

knowledge production. Three interconnected subthemes illuminate this border crossing. The first is reflections on the iterative nature of proposal development, which revealed that comprehensiveness does not equate to quality and that theoretical mastery demands active ownership rather than passive summarisation. The second is reflections on navigating literature review demands, where I learned that synthesis requires coherent argumentation rather than chronological coverage. The third is reflections on the autoethnographic experience of final thesis revisions, during which I confronted the reality that scholarly uncertainty is not a deficit to eliminate but an epistemic stance to cultivate. Together, these subthemes demonstrate how doctoral education necessitates a fundamental shift from seeking certainty and closure to embracing complexity, ambiguity, and the inherently interpretive nature of knowledge construction.

3.2.1 Reflections on the iterative nature of proposal development

As I worked through multiple proposal revisions, the supervisors' expectations became increasingly clear yet simultaneously more challenging to meet. After my third submission, Supervisor A wrote:

> "*There is a lot of improvement on this proposal, both in terms of the arguments and the presentation. There are, however, a few things to address before we can submit it*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This acknowledgement of progress provided encouragement; however, his subsequent comments revealed how far I still had to travel. The feedback exposed my persistent struggle with scholarly argumentation:

> "*The proposal is too long. A PhD proposal should be around 5000 words. You have more than 15000 words! This contributes to blurring your explanation of some aspects of the proposal*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

I had equated comprehensiveness with quality, believing that more detail demonstrated greater knowledge and preparation. The expectation that I should distil complex ideas into concise, focused arguments required an analytical economy that I had not developed. As Oyero (2006) notes, academic writing often suffers from what he terms "verbal obesity," which is the excessive wordiness that obscures rather than clarifies ideas. More fundamentally, Supervisor A identified persistent conceptual confusion, such as:

> "*The conceptualisation still needs to be aligned with the theoretical tools. How do past experiences relate to Bourdieu's theory (field, capital, habitus)? If this is problematic, I would advise you to instead focus on how the social context of lecturers influences their use of technology*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This comment revealed my superficial engagement with my chosen theoretical framework. I had selected Bourdieu's framework partly because it appeared frequently in education literature, but I lacked a deep understanding of its epistemological foundations and analytical applications. His acknowledgement was both encouraging and intimidating when he commented:

> "*Your reading of Bourdieu has greatly improved, and I am happy. Your explanation of his concepts is however still not very clear, especially how the different concepts of the theory will apply in your study*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

I was improving, yet clarity remained elusive. This feedback illuminated a pattern, that is, my tendency toward tentative, uncertain expression in theoretical discussions was not merely a stylistic inadequacy but rather a genuine conceptual struggle. Earlier feedback had been more direct about my theoretical misunderstandings. When discussing Bourdieu's concepts, Supervisor A had written:

> "*This is not correct. You need to read Bourdieu well and not focus on secondary sources of his works. Bourdieu's perception of power is situated in his view of the dialectic between structure and agency. The three concepts of his theory of practice are field, capital and habitus*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

The definitiveness of "This is not correct" shocked me. In my teaching practice, I rarely made such categorical assessments about learners' work, preferring encouraging feedback that built confidence. Yet Supervisor A continued with a statement that would transform my understanding of doctoral education. According to him,

> "*For a PhD study, you will need to master the theoretical lens you adopt because it is expected that you will become a resource person in the use of that theory after your PhD*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This comment revealed epistemological expectations that were entirely foreign to my experience. Doctoral study was not merely about completing a research project; it was about developing expertise that positioned one as an authority within scholarly conversations. This level of mastery required a certainty that I did not feel. His subsequent guidance made the developmental pathway explicit:

> "*Bourdieu's theory is about how a field of practice shapes the actions of the agents of that field, and how the actions of the agents also shape or reproduce the nature of the field. My suggestion is this: do a comprehensive reading of Bourdieu, then do PowerPoint presentation of his theory to Supervisor B and myself*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

The requirement to present the theory to my supervisors terrified me. How could I teach them about Bourdieu when they clearly possessed a deeper understanding? Yet this pedagogical inversion reflected the supervisors' epistemological stance—that knowledge is demonstrated through the capacity to explain, defend, and apply concepts rather than merely summarise them (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). This approach aligns with constructivist learning theory, where the doctoral student must actively construct meaning through the articulation and justification of theoretical frameworks (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The anxiety I experienced was not merely emotional; it represented a threshold concept through which I had to move beyond the passive reception of theory towards active ownership and critical engagement with Bourdieu's conceptual tools. While such transitions are inherent to doctoral education globally, the contrast was particularly pronounced given my Nigerian educational background, where pedagogical authority remained firmly hierarchical and students were rarely positioned as knowledge transmitters to their teachers (Wolhuter, 2006). In my prior experience, teaching was the exclusive domain of the lecturer, and students demonstrated knowledge through written assessments rather than through pedagogical performance. By requiring me to teach rather than simply report, my supervisors created conditions for deeper cognitive processing and the development of what Shulman (2017) terms 'pedagogical content knowledge', demonstrating that I could not only understand Bourdieu but could also transform that understanding into a communicable, defensible scholarly argument.

3.2.2 Reflections on navigating literature review demands

Nineteen months into my doctorate, I submitted my literature review and methodology chapters. Supervisor A's feedback arrived with comments that fundamentally challenged my approach. His comment was that:

> "*The chapter is well written, but you have not read enough. You need to read more widely on each topic of your Literature Review and show evidence of that reading in the comprehensive manner in which you cover each topic, and in the number of sources you discuss. For a PhD study, a Literature Review chapter should not be less than 10000 words*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This feedback generated profound uncertainty. I had consulted what I considered an impressive number of sources, synthesising diverse perspectives. Yet the expectation for comprehensiveness far exceeded my efforts. More significantly, the comment revealed that the length and breadth of the literature review served as markers of scholarly engagement. As Boote and Beile (2005) argue,

doctoral students must demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the relevant body of knowledge that extends beyond superficial coverage. Earlier feedback on my literature review had been even more challenging. Supervisor A had noted that:

> "*You need to redo your literature review. For now, what you have is a collection what some scholars have said, and you do not have a coherent argument holding all the parts together. Every paragraph should have a theme which is linked to your main argument, then the literature cited should talk to theme*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This comment exposed my fundamental misunderstanding. I had organised the literature by topic or chronology, believing that comprehensive coverage constituted an adequate review. The expectation that the literature should build a coherent argument, with each paragraph advancing a thematic claim supported by synthesised sources, required an entirely different compositional logic (Renner et al., 2022). Supervisor A continued,

> "*You should then identify the gap of the literature cited in relation to the theme and how your study intends to fill that gap*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This expectation for continuous gap identification throughout the literature review, rather than merely in a dedicated section, reflected an argumentative stance I struggled to maintain. It required me to simultaneously demonstrate respect for existing scholarship through comprehensive engagement while also asserting its inadequacy by identifying gaps. This created a delicate epistemological balance between deference and critique (Boote & Beile, 2005). The challenge extended to my theoretical engagement, where Supervisor A observed that,

> "*The theoretical framework you have adopted is appropriate for studying how people's past experiences shape their actions. You, however, have very limited knowledge of the theory, and you need to read further*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

This acknowledgement of appropriate theory selection, followed by the identification of limited understanding, encapsulated my epistemological position. I could recognise relevant concepts but lacked the depth to apply them rigorously. This partial knowledge generated persistent uncertainty about whether my interpretations were accurate or my applications appropriate. This situation reflects what researchers encounter when selecting a theoretical framework based on personal conviction rather than on the suitability of the theory to the research problem and its epistemological assumptions (van der Waldt, 2024). The uncertainty I experienced extended beyond technical execution to encompass the legitimacy of my interpretative claims, raising fundamental questions about the reliability of findings produced when researchers operate without complete mastery of their theoretical tools. As novice researchers often struggle with explicitly stating their theoretical framework, all research questions inevitably emerge from the researcher's implicit or explicit assumptions (Luft et al., 2022), making the gap between theoretical knowledge and confident application a critical methodological concern.

3.2.3 Reflection on the autoethnographic experience of final thesis revisions

As I worked through these challenges, subsequent feedback revealed both progress and ongoing struggle. Supervisor A provided guidance that would shape my entire doctoral trajectory,

> "*Below are the comments I picked up and how you could address them*" (Supervisor A, 2022).

What followed were detailed suggestions for strengthening my literature review, each revealing the epistemological expectations I was gradually internalising. One comment particularly highlighted the need for contextual justification:

> "*Here you could highlight the fact that with the coming of Covid-19, almost all disciplines now use different technological platforms to teach. Indicate that the use of technology in teaching goes beyond these platforms, as there is a diverse range of technological*

> *applications used in teaching and learning (such as...). Then mention that it is within this context that this study is situated"* (Supervisor A, 2022).

This guidance demonstrates how scholarly arguments require explicit positioning within contemporary contexts and debates, connecting research to broader developments rather than treating it as an isolated inquiry (Aulls & Shore, 2023). Another comment addressed my persistent difficulty with theoretical integration; the comment states thus:

> *"Here, you create a link between the massification of higher education and the use of technology in teaching and learning (massification has made the use of technology more relevant)"* (Supervisor A, 2022).

The expectation that I should forge conceptual connections between different phenomena, such as massification, technology adoption, and pedagogical practice, required synthetic thinking that moved beyond descriptive reporting to analytical integration. Perhaps most significantly for my epistemological development, Supervisor A suggested that:

> *"You need a paragraph in your literature (under technology and the teaching of African language) in which you create a link between the concept of linguistic decolonisation and the use of technology in teaching African languages"* (Supervisor A, 2022).

The above guidance introduced me to the relevance of decolonial scholarship for my study, opening theoretical perspectives I had not previously considered. It exemplified how supervision can expand students' epistemological horizons by introducing frameworks that complicate or enrich initial conceptualisations. As my doctorate progressed into data analysis, the challenge of scholarly uncertainty deepened. When I submitted my findings chapter, Supervisor A noted, *"You have done a good job and there are just a few things to fix before you submit"* (Supervisor A, 2023). However, his subsequent comments revealed significant conceptual gaps: *"You need a discussion section under which you discuss your data in relation to the literature you presented in Chapters 2 and 3"* (Supervisor A, 2023). I had presented findings separately from the literature, believing this constituted objective reporting. The expectation that findings must be interpreted through theoretical and empirical lenses, engaging in dialogue with existing scholarship, reflected epistemological assumptions about knowledge as inherently interpretive rather than self-evident (Schwartz-Shea, 2023). He continued with guidance that would prove crucial: *"You need to always explain the relevance of your themes to your study. Why was it important to gather information on a particular topic or issue?"* (Supervisor A, 2022). This expectation for continuous justification of analytical choices demanded reflexive awareness of one's research logic, making explicit the reasoning often left tacit in data presentation (Tracy, 2010).

Throughout these revisions, I wrestled with profound uncertainty about my scholarly judgement. Was I interpreting the theory correctly? Had I read enough? Were my arguments sufficiently sophisticated? Did my data analysis demonstrate theoretical mastery? These questions generated anxiety but also a gradual recognition that scholarly uncertainty is not inadequate to overcome but rather an epistemic stance to cultivate. As Barnett (2007) argues, higher learning involves developing comfort with complexity, ambiguity, and provisionality rather than seeking premature certainty.

3.3 Epistemic cultures and scholarly uncertainty

This second transition illuminates differences in what Cetina (1999) terms epistemic cultures: diverse ways knowledge-producing communities construct, validate, and communicate knowledge. My Nigerian teaching practice operated within an epistemic culture that privileged certainty, closure, and authoritative transmission, serving important pedagogical functions, as learners acquiring foundational literacy need clear models and confident guidance, particularly where educational resources are limited (Sayed et al., 2021). Academic research, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, operates within a different epistemic culture that values uncertainty, tentativeness, and acknowledgement of complexity (Barnett, 2007). This reflects epistemological commitments: a

recognition that social phenomena are complex and contextual; an acknowledgement that knowledge is socially constructed and subject to revision (Berger & Luckmann, 2016); and a valuing of scholarly dialogue over individual expertise (Kahl, 2025).

Supervisory feedback consistently pushed me toward this epistemic culture. When Supervisor A noted, "This is not correct" regarding my interpretation of Bourdieu, he modelled a precise theoretical understanding. Such direct and blunt feedback is characteristic of the South African supervisory culture, where robust critical engagement is often expected and tolerated as part of the academic process, unlike in many Western contexts, where such feedback may be perceived as discouraging and could trigger student protests or formal complaints. Within this context, the feedback served not as discouragement but as an epistemological correction, pushing me towards more rigorous engagement with Bourdieu's primary texts. His insistence that I "read Bourdieu well and not focus on secondary sources" reflected the academic culture's commitment to engaging directly with foundational texts. Rhetorical conventions expressing scholarly uncertainty (hedging, qualification, modal verbs) encode fundamental epistemological stances. When students struggle to adopt these conventions, they grapple with alien epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge (Lillis & Turner, 2001). However, supervisory feedback revealed paradoxical expectations: to demonstrate uncertainty about knowledge claims while showing certainty about theoretical understanding. When Supervisor A stated I would "need to master the theoretical lens you adopt," he articulated expectations for confident expertise, whilst I was simultaneously expected to express tentativeness about empirical claims.

Border crossing theory illuminates why this transition was disorienting. I was crossing an epistemological border between communities with fundamentally different relationships to certainty. Anzaldúa (2004) describes border crossing as involving profound identity disruption. My Nigerian pedagogical identity was built on epistemic confidence, while my emerging doctoral identity required epistemic humility, creating what Pritchard (2021) terms 'epistemic vertigo'. This reflects doctoral students' borderline position, occupying transitional identities characterised by partial competence (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). However, this border crossing opened possibilities for productive hybridity. I developed 'contextual epistemic flexibility': the capacity to adopt different stances toward knowledge depending on the context.

3.4 Epistemological liminality as scholarly position

These transitions reveal a common pattern: epistemological liminality. Liminality, an anthropological concept describing the threshold phase in rites of passage (Turner, 2017), refers to being among and between established categories. For international postgraduate students, liminality involves occupying uncertain positions between prior and emerging knowledge systems. I frequently experienced 'epistemic vertigo', a destabilising sense that familiar grounds of certainty had dissolved (Turner, 1983). This manifested emotionally (anxiety, impostor feelings), cognitively (confusion about expectations), and practically (paralysis in writing). When Supervisor B noted my proposal was "too shallow" (Supervisor B, 2021), or when Supervisor A commented, "This is not correct", I experienced profound disorientation. However, liminality possesses productive potential. My border position between Nigerian pedagogy and South African scholarship eventually enabled me to critically examine both, recognising strengths and limitations that were invisible from within either system (Turner, 1983).

Realising this required several conditions. First, supervisory relationships that validated rather than dismissed my prior knowledge. Second, access to scholarly resources. The supervisors' explicit instructions to "read Bourdieu well" and "discuss existing literature and show what is lacking" (Supervisor A & Supervisor B, 2021 & 2022) provided scaffolding, contrasting with approaches that assume students will naturally absorb conventions (Qi et al., 2021). Third, sufficient time for epistemological development rather than quick fixes (Meyer & Land, 2005). Finally, opportunities to

synthesise multiple knowledge systems were encouraged through guidance to explore connections between technology, African languages, and decolonisation (Gutiérrez, 2008). These conditions do not arise automatically. Without them, epistemological liminality risks becoming chronic alienation rather than a productive transition. Students may abandon doctoral studies, conform superficially to academic conventions without genuine epistemological transformation, or experience persistent impostor syndrome that undermines scholarly confidence (Bodiat, 2024).

3.5 Towards transformative supervision

This autoethnographic analysis reveals that epistemological transitions involve profound identity transformations, cultural negotiations, and power-laden encounters with dominant knowledge systems. Effective supervision of international postgraduate students requires transformative supervision: pedagogical approaches that actively create conditions for productive border crossing and epistemological flourishing. This section synthesises insights from my narrative and theoretical frameworks to propose principles and practices for transformative supervision in transnational contexts.

The fundamental principle involves actively validating students' prior knowledge systems rather than treating them as deficits. This requires substantive engagement with students' existing expertise as legitimate scholarly resources. Relationships should begin with explicit exploration of students' educational and professional histories through biographical knowledge mapping. International students often face language barriers and differing epistemological traditions, which impact their socialisation and adjustment (Bokayev, 2024). In the South African context, these barriers are compounded by the legacy of apartheid-era knowledge systems, where Western epistemologies were institutionally privileged over indigenous and African knowledge traditions, creating a cultural dominance that continues to shape supervisory dynamics today. For international students arriving from contexts such as Nigeria, navigating this layered epistemological landscape adds a further dimension of complexity beyond what is typically experienced in Global North institutions. When providing feedback, supervisors should identify strengths rooted in students' prior contexts before addressing areas for development. Scaffolding facilitates transitions by offering temporary support that diminishes as proficiency increases (Park, 2025). New scholarly conventions should be framed as invitations to expand repertoires rather than requirements to replace existing practices. Academic literacy involves knowledge learning, meaning-making, and understanding power, all of which influence identity construction (Lea & Street, 2006).

Beyond validation, much of what international students find challenging involves tacit expectations that remain invisible to newcomers. Communication barriers, including cultural dominance and insufficient training, hinder effective supervision (Mncina et al., 2024). In the South African higher education landscape, cultural dominance manifests particularly through the continued privileging of Western scholarly discourse and supervision styles, which can marginalise students from diverse epistemological backgrounds. This is especially evident when supervisory practices remain rooted in colonial academic traditions, failing to account for the epistemological diversity that characterises the South African context. Transformative supervision requires explicitly naming these tacit dimensions, making visible the invisible rules of academic culture (Adedokun & Joshua-Oyetunde, 2024). Supervisors should provide explicit scaffolding for unfamiliar academic genres, including content, structural, and linguistic scaffolding (Choi & Wong, 2018). When supervisors and students communicate only regarding academic content and students follow instructions completely, students may achieve more academic output in the short term but lack autonomy (Su et al., 2022). Creating dialogic environments where diverse knowledge systems can encounter each other productively becomes equally important. Transformative supervision requires creating third spaces, that is, environments where students can experiment with hybrid practices and where epistemological differences become resources for learning (Gutiérrez, 2008).

4. Conclusions

This autoethnographic study has examined the epistemological transitions of international postgraduate students within the context of South African higher education, as illustrated by my progression from teaching in a Nigerian primary school to pursuing doctoral studies. Employing theories of academic literacies, communities of practice, border crossing and third space theory, as well as decolonial perspectives, I analysed the transitions from technical accuracy to critical reflexivity, from certainty to scholarly uncertainty. These transitions are characterised by significant identity transformations, cultural negotiations, and encounters with power-laden knowledge hierarchies. International students often experience epistemological liminality, which constitutes prolonged periods of navigation between established knowledge systems, resulting in manifestations of confusion and self-doubt. While supervisory feedback is typically constructive, it can frequently exacerbate this disorientation. Nevertheless, with appropriate support, liminality can evolve into a productive scholarly position, facilitating hybrid insights that are inaccessible from singular epistemologies. My position at the border ultimately afforded me critical perspectives on both Nigerian and South African educational systems. This study advocates for a transformative supervisory framework grounded in validating prior knowledge systems, making implicit expectations explicit, creating third spaces for dialogue, supporting hybrid identity development, and maintaining critical reflexivity about power. These translate into concrete practices for supervisors and institutions supporting international students' epistemological flourishing.

This study acknowledges several limitations. As a single-participant autoethnographic study, this research cannot claim empirical generalisability. My experiences are shaped by personal characteristic factors, including my Nigerian background, South African institutional context, education discipline, and personal biography. Future studies of this nature might employ prospective longitudinal designs documenting transitions as they unfold, comparative case studies across multiple contexts, or participatory approaches centring international students' collective voices. Research examining supervisors' perspectives could complement this student-centred focus.

Despite these limitations, this study provides insider perspectives rarely captured in supervision literature, which typically privileges supervisory viewpoints. The specific focus on the Nigeria to South Africa educational corridor addresses a significant gap, as literature often centres on Global North to South transitions. By connecting personal narrative to theoretical frameworks, the study offers practical implications for supervisors working with international students. This study challenges us to reconceptualise epistemological transitions not as deficits to overcome but as complex negotiations with productive potential, particularly when met with transformative supervision that honours diversity, validates multiple knowledge systems, and supports students in developing hybrid scholarly identities. As South African higher education continues to internationalise during simultaneous decolonial transformation, supporting international students' epistemological transitions is not merely a practical pedagogical concern but a political and ethical imperative, required for creating more inclusive, epistemologically pluralistic, and genuinely transformative academic communities.

5. Declarations

featured in this narrative and whose experiences, knowingly or unknowingly, contributed to the development of this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data generated or analysed during this study are included in the manuscript. Additional details on data processing methods and analyses may be provided upon reasonable request.

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