

SPATIALIZING MY RESEARCHER IDENTITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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As an Indonesian lecturer and now an international graduate student who is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States, I found that research is an integral part of defining who I am as an academic and who I want to be within my academic community. Henkel (2005) argued that research is the ultimate currency in higher education, since it legitimizes one to be a member of his or her academic community. In other words, without research, society cannot fully identify me as either a lecturer or a graduate student. As I live for and thrive through academic success in the complexities of academic communities and its cultures, my researcher identity has turned out not to be a single static unity nor to stand in a vacuum. Instead, my identity is discursively and progressively enacted in my on-going teaching and research work, which interacts with academic discourse over time and space. In this article, I focus on the spatial orientation—focusing on my shuttling to different contexts of higher education—to frame my research identity construction. My research identity then becomes an on-going process that is situated and evolves within space, and as a result, it becomes versatile (Madikizela-Madiya, 2014). This article is my metaphorical space to reflect on and articulate my researcher identity construction as I shuttle from one space to the other.

Before narrating my research journey between and among different places, I define the terms of researcher identity, research, and space that are employed in this article. To define research identity, I follow Clarke's (2009) notion, denoting that identity is mutually intertwined with certain discourse and communities. In higher education, teaching and research are entwined as the unified professional work of lecturers; thus, the lecturer's identity can be marked as a teacher-researcher identity (Taylor, 2017). Borg (2013) referred to the term *research* in teaching work as *teacher research*, representing any research done in school or higher education to enhance the understanding of teachers' work. In this article, my research work relates to my learning to conduct research and write academic publications in higher education. A professional space plays a critical construct for my researcher identity formation. The notion of space here is against a long-standing traditional view: space as pre-given physical structures (Madikizela-Madiya, 2014; McGregor, 2004). Space as a fixed context is disruptive because it excludes people's interactions and only values material structures. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space links with the integrated semiotic entities that accommodate symbolic relations and interactions between human and materials. The idea of space here is broadening from the physical sphere to virtual, metaphorical, social, and even personal space as long as it gives meaning to individuals, or rather, space provides opportunities and resources to influence and be influenced by humans and material interactions. Treating space in higher education as significant in the process of lecturer identity construction means acknowledging the contributions of any integrated physical and social resources and interactions that impact a lecturer's work.

Identity takes on continual identification and negotiation within the process of living and shuttling between spaces. Hanauer (2010) noted that a temporal physical site produces identity, and when individuals change place, they reconstruct and renegotiate their identity. Similarly, Khademi-Vidra (2014) defined space as the site for identity performance. As such, when individuals move from one place to the other, they will

situate, construct, and re-construct a sense of identity through their perceptions and act in relation to physical, socio-cultural environments embodied in space. Lefebvre (1991) employed the term representational space, where space becomes dynamic and individuals can adjust the existing space and define that space with a new meaning to suit their needs. This representational space echoes the notion of spatializing. Low (1996) defined spatializing as the way individuals “locate, both physically and conceptually, social relations, and social practice in social [representational] space” (p. 861). In other words, lecturers can spatialize their work by viewing space as the representational space where they locate their work and actively re-define the meaning of space for their work and, accordingly, their identities.

In the context of Indonesian higher education, lecturers are required to do three related tasks to maintain their professional standing: teaching, research, and service. In doing so, lecturers travel to different spaces and spatialize their work. The ways in which they utilize their space to accommodate their work contribute to the way they see themselves as professionals in higher education. In this article, I narrate my own spatializing research journey. I realize the three lecturer tasks are treated as equally important in my institution. However, I give particular attention to my research development and identity, since research is highly regarded as the professional currency in the wider academic community. In this article, I articulate my vulnerability and development through different spaces in the context of higher education.

SPATIALIZING MY RESEARCHER IDENTITY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE *CURRERE* METHOD

I use the *currere* method in spatializing my researcher identity to make sense of how my it is entangled with and evolving within spaces. According to Pinar (1975), the *currere* method is “the self-conscious conceptualization of the temporal,” “the viewing of what is conceptualized through time,” and “the complex relation between the temporal and the conceptual” (p. 1). This method can help me to frame the construction of researcher identity through complex research learning processes as I travel between different spaces. As I identify the spaces where I move and reside temporarily, I aim to explore the spatial impacts on my research scholarship development vis-à-vis researcher identity. Each space represents the amalgamation of physical and social integrations that support and constrain the process of transition and transformation from a novice to a professional researcher. To contextualize the spatializing process of my research identity, I introduce the place where I resided and its popular tagline. Each space corresponds to a particular period: past, present, or future. In each space, I reflect on my strengths and weaknesses as a researcher, recognize constraints and affordances provided by semiotic resources within spaces, and develop a strategy for doing future research in higher education. In my narratives below, I begin my spatial journey with a poem, reflecting on myself as a novice lecturer and researcher. I then turn to my first trip to Australia. My journey continues as I pursue my doctoral degree in the United States, and this journey will continue as I return to my hometown, Ambon, Indonesia.

*I came to this ivory tower
A place I called my professional home
carrying small baggage embellished with a bachelor's degree in education
I had no clue that my teaching practice toolbox
Was incommensurate with demands of research labor
the academic currency that determined my value as a professional
I felt unsuited to and hopeless in my profession*

*Coz of my lack of research competence
I then chose to drag my small baggage again
now embroidered with four years of teaching experience
To travel to different spaces
I carried hope to gain more than just a research tool kit
I expected more than just an article with my name on it
I wanted to understand who I am within research
Who is not objectified by research
But the one who owns research as part of her being (IOT).*

*AUSTRALIA: THE LAND OF [CULTIVATING MY RESEARCHER IDENTITY] DOWN UNDER
AUSTRALIA IS CONSTRUED AS THE COUNTRY IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE, BELOW
OTHER COUNTRIES AROUND THE GLOBE.*

I embarked on my first actual research journey when I pursued my master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at one of the universities in Melbourne, Australia. Coming from a space with limited access and support systems to develop my research skills, I was mesmerized when I observed the physical environment of my new campus. At first, I thought that spacious and high-tech classrooms, study places, and a library would speed up my learning process. In reality, these facilities did not provide an instant change in my perspective. Instead, I had to interact and make good use of them, which took me some time as I learned to leverage all these semiotic resources. Due to my unfamiliarity, I sometimes felt overwhelmed and alienated when I tried to use the facilities despite any support and training provided. But then I kept telling myself that, if I wanted to instigate change, then I had cultivate versatility and be ready for change within myself. I gained basic research skills, such as searching for textbooks and references in the library system and engaging more with classroom discussion and study groups. This whole process supported my writing for coursework assignments and prepared me for larger research projects.

Fieldwork was introduced as soon as I started doing my thesis research. The research was rather short but complex because it took only four months for me to conduct research in my hometown and to write a thesis. I followed my advisor's advice to select my home university and colleagues as my research site and participants. This decision was based on the research problems found in my program and the practicality of accessing the research participants. By doing so, I could address the prevailing issues, initiate the solutions, and advocate for my colleagues and my program. I acknowledged that I faced many uncommon challenges in the research site, like time constraints in data collection or subjectivity as an insider in my research site. Thus, I decided to be more vulnerable and open to continuous learning and adjustment during data collection and analysis so I could build my research credibility. Finally, I wrote up my complete thesis without any significant trouble and successfully defeated my fear of research. This hands-on experience in thesis research increased my confidence and cultivated my research skills as a novice researcher.

*AMBON: SOJOURN IN MY FAR-FLUNG ISLAND
PEOPLE SOMETIMES CANNOT LOCATE AMBON ON A MAP, SINCE IT IS EITHER A TINY DOT
OR MISSING ALTOGETHER.*

After finishing my master's program, I went back to my home university in Ambon, carrying my research tool kit and a promise to myself to be more active and productive in research in my professional space. Madikizela-Madiya (2014) argued that space, like higher education, can have a lack of neutrality. This means that my aspiration might not

always match the contextual condition influenced by the sociopolitical tensions in my home university. The physical situation, with no good internet access and facilities for research, made engaging in research impractical. I encountered additional issues as soon as I was assigned to teaching tasks. As a junior lecturer with a newly minted master's degree, I had to accept an overloaded teaching assignment that required more than 50 hours of teaching per week. I was overwhelmed with preparation, teaching, and assessment. I felt drained and found it difficult to focus on research work. I had intended for my classroom to be an experimental space of teacher research, as I could bring improvement to my own teaching from research findings. Nevertheless, the excessive teaching hours limited my creativity, my research with curriculum, in team teaching, and with students. As a result, my passion to do research turned out to be a missing piece of my whole being as a lecturer.

Regardless of the challenges in my work site, I attempted to turn my thesis into a journal article to be published in one of the international journals in the English Education field. I was very shocked after learning that my article was rejected. The experience was even worse when I received harsh comments by the reviewers expecting me to seek help from “a native speaker” to edit my language. I felt downhearted at the time, because this incident unveiled the cruelty of the academic community. I was surprised how this community still upheld the mythical discourse of perfect English by “native speakers” who were considered as saviors for redeeming the language of international writers. I told myself that this experience would not derail my goal of becoming a good researcher and decided to focus on writing for conferences and seminars.

I then ventured to look for and create my own research space beyond the classroom with a group of students. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) interpreted space as temporal based on the action taken within the time boundaries. Instead of using a classroom as my research space, I developed my metaphorical space by engaging students who were eager to do research outside of the classroom. My office functioned as a research space where I was able to share my research knowledge and tool kits and conduct research collaboratively with my students. In this route, I chose to publish a short article for a research conference to redeem my academic work. I was not fully satisfied since I did not accomplish what I dreamed of after gaining my master's degree—the ambition to write and publish articles in an academic journal. Although I let nature take its course and continued working endless teaching hours, I knew had taken a small step toward doing research. I realized that this process was not enough for my research development. I had to find a way to develop my researcher identity such that it would support my teaching labor.

THE UNITED STATES: THE LAND OF THE FREE [RESEARCH SPACE]

THE UNITED STATES IS CLAIMED AS THE LAND OF THE FREE, WHERE PEOPLE CAN GAIN OPPORTUNITY AND FORTUNE.

After more than three years working in my home university, I realized it was time for me to free myself and looked for a space to grow my research passion and capacity. Thus, I decided to pursue my Ph.D. degree, and I am currently studying in the Composition and Applied Linguistics program in one of the public universities in western Pennsylvania. By shuttling beyond my working place, especially into a new higher education environment as a graduate student, I believed that I could have full access to more research prospects that would aid in my discovery of my whole being as a researcher. Madikizela-Madiya (2014) argued that individuals can develop their potential within a supportive physical environment. So, I traveled to a new sphere to

look for the land of the free with available research space to leverage my research skills and potential with opportunities, access, or materials.

At first, when I entered my new program, I found that the conducive physical environments were similar to my previous master's program. The physical facilities such as libraries, study rooms, classrooms, and buildings created a supportive and convenient learning atmosphere. However, I realized that the expectations of students in my doctoral program were higher compared to my previous master's program. Ph.D. students are expected to be intellectually independent in our learning, development, and research. Most courses in my current doctoral program have introduced me to the path of the research-based project by incorporating theories, practical experiences, and research interests. This space was ideal for my academic growth, yet it became a site of struggle. My academic skills were not capable of what my academic context expected. In the past, I wrote academic articles addressing effective teaching methods or strategies to satisfy my academic audience back in my home country. In contrast, during my doctoral program, I was expected to critically interrogate and challenge my own beliefs and praxis, something I had never been asked to do. I was perplexed and chose to be silent while deep down inside I battled with myself whether or not to unravel and voice my vulnerability.

I was fortunate to have a great academic support system of professors who guided me in growing academic maturity, as I slowly opened up to exploring who I was as a writer and researcher. My professors encouraged us, the international graduate students, to make good use of our writing center as a safe space to support our academic writing. I have learned that different spaces enact different writing discourses; thus, I had to negotiate my own voice within a different space of writing. In my learning journey, my professors also fostered critical ideas to spark a discussion and collaborative works for research. They gave constructive feedback for our coursework papers and suggested revising them and turning them into publishable articles for journals or conferences. I was excited to know that I could learn how to write for publication. My classmates became my research partners as we shared our research interests in the physical classroom, our zoom meetings, or the coffee shop. This journey taught me that learning can occur anywhere, from the classroom to the coffee shop. This practice has affirmed what McGregor (2004) stated regarding how space is "made" and "re-made" by combining materials and social practices (p. 354). A coffee shop becomes a work site for an individual like me who personalizes this place as a working site for writing my dissertation.

During this new chapter of expanding my research space, I learned to courageously send my papers to academic conventions, such as the TESOL Convention and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (4Cs). The first time when I presented my research in these prestigious forums, I was very nervous, because I met so many big names in my field. Those scholars taught me about humility as I met them in person and shared my research interests with them. I felt validated and became more positive and confident about what I am doing, which led to me sending my manuscripts to several top-tier journals. Although I still experienced some rejection, I was beyond happy to accept it. My happiness came from reviewers' constructive feedback on the content of my articles. I came to believe that the academic publication process has some sense of fairness. I then rerouted my navigation. I took ownership of publication by choosing a good journal that can give me the freedom to express my voice, rather than just journals that are most popular. I value not just the product of my publication work, but also my endeavors to publish them. This stage of my early publications was very crucial, because it helped me to shape my identity as a progressive researcher.

AMBON: A [RESEARCH] LIGHT FROM THE EAST

AMBON HAS BEEN LABELED AS "A LIGHT FROM THE EAST" LIKE THE SUN RISES IN THE EAST, SHOWING THE OPTIMISM OF LIFE.

As I am going to finish my Ph.D. study in the near future, I plan to return to my hometown, Ambon, to continue working in my university as an educator and a researcher. I envision my future path of being and becoming a researcher who actively negotiates the demands and needs of my academic community as my ecological space (Billot, 2010). This aspiration keeps me motivated to focus on what I have learned and done with my research and how I can integrate it with my teaching praxis in my context. Therefore, I will raise my awareness of any existing affordances in my work site and capitalize on them to accommodate my research. For instance, I will begin by introducing an autoethnography as one of the forms of qualitative research to my students. I can ask the students to interrogate their own literacy trajectory and write an autoethnography as a way to understand their own learning and identity as a language learner. This essay can be an example of how they may explore and narrate their journey in a particular topic. Another instance is building a research partnership in my program. I will invite my academic communities, including my colleagues and students, to initiate the research group to foster the habits of writing academically in collaborative ways. With the heavy teaching workload, the research group allows a safe atmosphere and a support system for lecturers and students to share knowledge as they work collaboratively in conducting research.

Another aspiration that I aim to achieve is to benefit from a network with my professors and university in the United States by creating a partnership with my home university. One way is by providing support in the establishment of a writing center at my home university. With the era of the digital age, a geographical territory does not limit any collaboration from different parties in different countries. During this time of the Covid-19 Pandemic, people in my hometown rely more on digital platforms, like Zoom or Google Classroom, as learning spaces. Thus, I will make use of this digital platform for conducting webinars from the United States or other places to my small island, Ambon. The physical space has evolved into a digital space that shows the incorporation of technology and people for the sake of communication. This digital platform also reflects a representational space, suggesting that a learning space is no longer a brick and mortar institution. The virtual space has now been utilized for people to study together without any physical presence in one space. These examples of my aspiration are the forms of my plans that I aim to apply upon my arrival at my home university. I believe that I will continue adjusting and negotiating my path to build my representational space with the support of my environment regardless of the possible roadblocks that may cause a detour in that journey.

My journey in constructing and re-constructing my researcher identity has not finished yet. It will continuously advance and transform through my travel in different spaces. Space has become a significant construct in my researcher identity formation. Hence, I will keep seeking opportunity and access to travel from one space to another, physical to metaphorical ones. From those spaces, I can experience more inquiries, bring the research learning back to my classrooms, and inspire more teacher-researchers to be confident in doing research to improve their teaching.

*One day,
I will return to my own ivory tower
Carrying my suitcase with an emblem*

*of the humble heart of a learner
 And of the sharp-witted mind of an inquirer
 In my suitcase, I packed my research tool kits
 Wrapped with my struggles and achievements
 As I bring to the classroom
 I ain't talking just about my work
 But sharing my spatial journey
 To inspire the young to go on their path
 And create their own story of being a researcher.*

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