

# *Reading groups as spaces of learning and resistance: care, emotions and feminism in EAP*

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# READING GROUPS AS SPACES OF LEARNING AND RESISTANCE: CARE EMOTIONS AND FEMINISM IN EAP

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## Abstract

*Care, emotions and feminism are critical concepts in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) landscape. However, to date they have existed largely on the periphery, seldom given equal standing alongside more traditional EAP areas of focus. Recognizing the need for change, this article is the result of a dialogic inquiry of four female academics from different UK Higher education institutions who met via a conference reading group foregrounding these topics at the 2023 BALEAP conference.*

*Our investigation explored the role of reading groups in our professional practice and development. In particular, their potential as 'counter-sites' (Foucault, 1986) or spaces of radical possibility for self-directed learning, community building and resistance to increasing encroachment on academic autonomy and the commercialisation of academic labour. Underpinning our reflections and dialogues were three pivotal texts selected for this conference reading session. These explored care as a central academic value (Tuck, 2018), emotions as activism (Benesch, 2020), and the 'disruptive potential' of feminism (Cerdá, 2020, p.216). As discussion lies at the heart of any reading group, we adopted a methodology which centres dialogue and polyvocality, allowing for the researchers' individual voices to be heard and seen: duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Accordingly, we present our inquiry as duoethnographers often do (e.g., Lowe and Lawrence, 2020), via scripted dialogues.*

*The analysis is organised into four thematic sections, positioned as 'stepping stones': socialisation into EAP, developing as an EAP practitioner, gendered experiences: tensions and power struggles, and community, belonging and finding a home. Each section begins with a brief introduction and concludes with a reflective summary to guide the reader. The dialogues, however, are the core elements of the write-up,*

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*designed to engage the reader in an ongoing conversation, prompting reflection on personal experiences and understandings.*

*We invite you, the reader, to join this conversation. Reflecting on and sharing your own insights will bring discussions around care, emotions and feminism to the fore. We believe this meaningful development and expansion of core EAP discourses will enrich our professional and academic community for all.*

**Keywords:** Care, Emotions, Feminism, Reading Group, Professional Development, Belonging.

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading circles, reading groups, or what Allison (2014, p.39) describes as 'learning development groups' are a type of teacher-led continuing professional development (CPD) activity where, through regular meetings, participants 'share best practice, support each other and commit to trying out new teaching strategies and/or resources'. They positively contribute to CPD and community building by, among other things, creating opportunities for collaborative critical reflection and increasing teachers' sense of belonging (Hessling et al., 2018; Himelein & Anderson, 2020). Since the pandemic, such spaces in the context of EAP have become increasingly common. The BALEAP mailing list offers valuable insight into such initiatives: the EAP for Social Justice SIG's three-part summer reading group on race in language teaching in 2021, Alex Ding's reading group on social theory in 2022 and the ongoing Transnational Education SIG's Reading Cafe and the Academic Literacies SIG's Reading Club to name a few. The 2023 BALEAP conference boldly trialed a novel format to explore whether the benefits of reading groups could provide meaningful opportunities for effective knowledge exchange and professional growth. Two reading groups were timetabled; this article provides a write up of one of them.

Although this conference reading group on *Care, Emotions and Feminism in EAP* was proposed and run by an individual EAP practitioner (Iwona Winiarska-Pringle), this write-up – drawing on data collected via asynchronous duoethnographic investigation – has been collaborative. The intention behind this was twofold. Firstly, by bringing to the fore voices beyond that of the session's 'speaker', we offer a more nuanced and critical reflection on the event. Secondly, inviting all session

participants to participate in this collective and dialogic reflection reflects a core feminist praxis principle to include 'the other' in the inquiry process to disrupt epistemological power relations (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Whilst participants at any BALEAP reading group may not be 'marginalized' in the same way as the communities' feminist methodologies draw attention to, which stories are being told and whose experiences are being ex-/included have significant consequences for knowledge creation. This recognition is particularly timely for the field of EAP, as it grapples with its identity and positioning within the academy (Ding & Bruce, 2017). The co-authorship of this write-up highlights the interconnectedness of knowledge building as a social and relational practice as well as material (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013). Additionally, as the three selected texts for this conference reading group session – *care*, Tuck, 2018; *emotions*, Benesch, 2020 & *feminism*, Cerdá, 2022 – allowed us to explore new and/or lesser discussed perspectives on the work of EAP practitioners, this collective write-up on the experience of participating in this reading group session has allowed multiple voices, knowledge and experiences around these under-explored concepts in EAP to become equally visible and, therefore, valued.

## METHODOLOGY

The process of data collection and write-up followed the core tenets of duoethnography: life as a curriculum, dialogue and polyvocality, differences as a strength, reflexivity, and an ethic of care (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). In this section, we offer a brief introduction to these tenets and our rationale for taking this approach to data collection and analysis, before overviewing the practical procedures we followed.

## WHAT IS DUOETHNOGRAPHY?

Duoethnography is a collaborative, qualitative research methodology which, despite its name, can be undertaken by any number of researchers. It follows the principles set by Jo Norris and Richard Sawyer who, in 2004, engaged in the first *dialogic* autoethnography, later dubbed 'duoethnography' (Lowe & Lawrence, 2020). Central to duoethnography is the concept of 'currere', defined by Sawyer & Norris as 'critical self-examination [...] of the curriculum of everyday life' (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.12); a reflexive process of recalling and analysing past events which can lead to a change in how they are interpreted. This intended reconceptualisation is supported and enhanced by another core tenet of duoethnography: dialogue between researchers. By juxtaposing two (or more) contrastive narratives,

duoethnographers create space for new meaning making through identifying and exploring 'gaps that lie between different perspectives and different voices' (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.21) that each researcher brings to their investigation. To do that, they engage in on-going dialogic efforts to deconstruct and reconstruct their own narratives, hoping to better understand and, where appropriate, challenge cultural and social metanarratives. By offering multiple perspectives on the same story, duoethnographers can disrupt 'dominant rhetoric framings [...] and discourses' (Lowe & Lawerance, 2020, p.12) about cultures and societies.

Such disruptions and meaning making can be both intense and challenging, therefore, duoethnographers must commit to an *ethic of care* to create trusting relations with one another. This is particularly important in the case of researchers who, as was the case at the outset of the current study, do not know each other well. All care must be taken to ensure that clear rules of engagement are set, dialogues are respectful and that all participants are open to change. Alternative interpretations can be difficult to receive and process, yet without them, transformation, another core tenet of duoethnography cannot be realised. In our discussions, we inevitably shared stories which involved interactions with others who did not participate in our project. Although no formal ethical approval has been sought for this write-up, all care was taken to ensure anonymity and security of the collected data. All authors were engaged in every stage of the write-up, though, not to the same extent which allowed us to work to our strengths and within our busy, and often conflicting schedules. The draft and final versions of this text were read and approved by all the authors.

Finally, we note that the dialogue and polyvocality in duoethnography do not stop at data collection, but continue into and throughout the analysis process, up to the final presentation of the study. Unlike other multi-authored approaches, duoethnographies maintain the authors' voices as separate and visible by allowing them to 'speak' directly to the reader via script-like dialogues which are reconstructed from the collected data. The dialogues are as close to the original data as possible except for interventions ensuring data anonymity and for clarity.

## PROCEDURES

An invitation to participate was shared with all attendees who had connected with the *Care, Emotions and Feminism in EAP* reading group via the conference app Sched. This initially received five responses; however, due to time and other practical constraints only three -

Kashmir, Lucy & Christine - were able to move forwards together with Iwona.

We began with an initial meeting together via Zoom to introduce ourselves. Iwona did not know anyone in person prior to the reading group session, but she followed Lucy on Twitter and knew of Kashmir's work at Leeds and from some of the Social Justice SIG events. Kashmir and Lucy followed each other on Twitter and had met at the 2019 BALEAP conference in Leeds. Christine had met Iwona briefly at the 2023 conference but had not met Kashmir or Lucy. We agreed approaches to confidentiality, took initial steps to build collaborative trust and agreed on the overall dual focus for the write-up: reflection on the value of reading groups for professional development and secondly their potential for helping participants explore lesser researched concepts in EAP. In the first instance we reflected individually on three prompt questions:

- What was your motivation(s) for attending/running the reading group on care, emotions and feminism at the conference?
- What are your thoughts on the concepts from the selected texts, and their application for EAP practice/research, and
- What was your experience of reading and learning together at the conference?

Individual reflections began with a focus on one question at a time which were shared and discussed asynchronously, as the authors are located at different higher education institutions across the UK. For each reflection (across three shared documents, one for each question), we used the 'comments' function to share our reactions and thoughts, which often led to clarifications, more questions and further comments. To further support this, we had several online Zoom meetings at strategic points and were in regular contact throughout the process via email and a dedicated WhatsApp chat.

As duoethnography does not 'seek universals' and champions visibility of individual authors' voices (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.21), it was particularly suited to this research project which explored the diversity of experiences when engaging with a reading group session at a large conference and lesser explored topics in the field of EAP. Reflecting the ethos and tenets of duoethnography, throughout this paper we self-reference using our given names rather than our surnames/family names.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Many interesting themes emerged from the rich data collected, yet for practical reasons this write-up focuses only on those most salient and of relevance to the primary focus of this article exploring the value of reading groups in conference settings (a second publication is planned to more directly explore the topics themselves). Analysis began initially in pairs to identify challenges and opportunities around reading groups via an iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), a process that served to highlight the complex and interrelated nature of our experiences and the meaning-making potential of duoethnography. Duoethnography rejects the idea that meanings can be separated from the interpreter and discovered as objective truths (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), emphasising that the dialogues and meaning making continue until the end of the writing process. Indeed, during the drafting of this write-up we engaged even more deeply with our conversations, moving away from the initial coding around opportunities and challenges of reading groups to an increasingly more nuanced view of their role in our professional development. This is when the four overarching themes, which we explore below, emerged.

## STEPPING STONES OF KNOWLEDGE – OR ‘FINDINGS’

Following Sawyer and Norris we consider our ‘findings’ from this project as ‘stepping stones’ (2013, p.107) uncovered in the process of our knowledge building. Each are temporally bound insights into the developmental journey undertaken throughout this project. The four stepping stones include *socialisation into EAP, developing as an EAP practitioner, gendered experiences: tensions and power struggles, and community, belonging and finding a home*. To help guide the reader through our discussions, we bookend each stepping stone with a brief introduction and closing reflection. However, the true centrepieces of our write-up are the dialogues themselves: they are intended to invite the reader to continue the conversation by considering and reflecting on their own experiences and understandings.

### STEPPING STONE 1. SOCIALISATION INTO EAP

This stepping stone explores the role of reading groups as an important learning space in relation to supporting the socialisation of teachers new to the EAP field. While reading groups are not the only effective spaces contributing to this process, their impact in the context of entering the field of EAP emerged as important. This was particularly pertinent for us,

each with varied and unique backgrounds prior to entering EAP (or indeed, not having worked in EAP at all).

**Kashmir:** I was quite excited when I noticed that there was going to be a reading group at the BALEAP conference. I had been instrumental in setting up roundtable discussions when I first started teaching at Leeds. I worked in broadcasting media before I retrained and moved to Education and EAP, so I was a newbie. I wanted to be fully integrated into the EAP culture. I thought reading groups was one way to do this.

**Christine:** This is so interesting – as a newcomer to BALEAP (and in many respects also to EAP), what is ‘EAP culture’? I wasn’t sure how I might fit in at the conference (presenting on EAP teacher wellbeing) – finding this reading group on the programme was certainly encouraging, and in some ways our discussions since have certainly helped socialise me into the field!

**Kashmir:** I was interested in hearing (and learning from) experienced colleagues’ readings of the articles (and if their ‘understandings’ coincided with mine). I thought immersion in the reading group would provide my thoughts and understandings legitimacy. I have fond memories of those roundtable discussions as it developed my confidence in being able to discuss EAP concepts and pedagogy and align my work with theory and EAP literature.

**Iwona:** I have a similar experience. There used to be a lunchtime reading group in Glasgow when I started. The texts were not always what I would have chosen but, that was the point. As I was new to EAP, I saw this as an opportunity to learn about the field and what my colleagues found important.

**Kashmir:** Hearing colleagues’ understandings and readings of text opens and widens one’s own thinking...sometimes in the act of responding to something I’ve heard in a reading group, my thoughts are clarified as I articulate the response...and also there’s many a time when I’ve taken a ‘morsel’ from a reading group and developed it into something concrete where it’s led to some scholarship or impacted my pedagogy.

**Iwona:** Me too! My EAP knowledge and scholarship have been growing in various directions driven by personal and professional experiences and interests, not a prescribed EdD or a PhD programme. I used to think it was my weakness because self-directed learning can be messy, overwhelming and full of self-doubt. But the more I learn, the more seemingly random areas form a coherent picture of my professional development journey. Reading has been central to this effort to teach myself EAP; reading and people.

**Kashmir:** My interest/journey in EAP started in a very similar way - no intended plan, just evolved organically .... I think I learned EAP on the job, through attending conferences, reading journal articles, discussions with colleagues and having an excellent introduction to it at my very first EAP teaching job at Durham University.

**Lucy:** My slight regret is that I never managed to have a career as an academic. I did my PhD in English Lit. but I took a permanent job in EAP because who turns those down these days? I also felt I had got very far behind because of bereavement and the birth of my son. I have always enjoyed intellectual work and worried that there wouldn't be any in EAP! Once I discovered critical pedagogy and started revisiting scholars like bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall, I found that loads of theorists talk about the classroom as a political space. It wasn't tangential or silly to think about EAP and international students in the context of the politics of UKHE. I got really excited by the possibilities and found that there were other people out there interested in the same ideas. It did re-energise me for a time.

**Iwona:** As most teachers seem to have stumbled into EAP, we perhaps don't feel as much pride or belonging to EAP as our academic colleagues to their disciplines. What unites us is our commitment to students and their success but following Tuck, I think we should care for and about the profession, too. As EAP professionals we have a responsibility to develop our knowledge about the field, challenge its boundaries and contribute to shaping its future. To do so we need time, funding and the safety of permanent contracts to read and discuss publications, attend events and organise ourselves around ideas we are passionate about, for example in SIGs or reading groups. Scholarship IS caring.

**Kashmir:** Yes, but the 'roundtable discussions' I mentioned earlier lasted a couple of years and then dwindled away for some reason...probably due to competing time pressures.

**Iwona:** The reading group I talked earlier about stopped too. As did the habit of cascading to the team when one attended an event - I miss both as there is a limit to what one can attend especially working part-time. Reading is perhaps less valued than other CPD activities? That is unless you run a reading group which makes it more public and timetabled, for example in the programme of the busiest EAP conference.

**Lucy:** That's so true. Other types of CPD such as a webinar on online training are prioritised rather than self-directed learning such as reading. And here we have another issue - learning what you actually want rather than what your department/school values. There is that pressure to monetise or water down everything to another badge or 'award' for the

institution. I keep coming back to this frustration I feel. What we do as CPD always has to be shown to be 'useful' and I would want to resist that. We need change in systemic and institutional ways.

**Kashmir:** Yes, reading/reading groups do not appear to be a priority CPD activity as there never seems to be quality time dedicated to it. Thank you for this, Iwona.

**Iwona:** Big thanks to the Warwick organisers and participants 😊. The moment I saw a reading group in the conference call for contributions, I was intrigued, and that thought wouldn't go away, especially because I had those three texts, I really wanted to talk to someone about them. Being participant-led, reading groups offer something different - a space open to all and constructed by all.

**Christine:** This definitely drew me in. It was the space I imagined it would give to think in midst of a busy conference schedule. Which is interesting, as a reading group probably requires much more active engagement than simply listening to another presentation! Still, it's exhausting being 'talked at' – no matter how interesting or relevant the topic. And actually, this *did* feel like time out to rest/relax before the next session somehow.

**Lucy:** When I saw Iwona's reading group on care, emotions and feminism on the schedule, I thought perhaps this might kick-start me and get me thinking about those radical ideas I'd been playing with since 2016 but hadn't been able to form into anything concrete. Those 3 words touched on all the themes I had been mulling over for years and chimed with ideas of being human and acknowledging bodies in the classroom, whether there is space for emotions and how we engage with them, combined with the radical, political possibilities of feminism.

**Christine:** I also think that the texts facilitated discussion about these issues without needing to read the full texts themselves – it might have been better if we (!!) had read them in advance I'm sure, but everyone joined the reading group to discuss these papers for a *reason*, and therefore with something to say/ready and willing to listen to others' experiences in relation to them...Understanding what this reason was and why people joined was fascinating – indirectly of course discussing some of the issues raised in the papers.

## REFLECTION

The process of socialisation into the field of EAP has been argued to be 'both ad hoc and post hoc' due to the lack of established pathways into the profession, diverse employment contexts and often fragmented

development opportunities (Ding, 2019, p.67). Although our conversations largely mirror studies reporting the common EAP experience of learning 'on the job' (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022), they add further insight to the in-situ nature of practitioners' development by bringing forth the role of reading groups in this process. In our conversations, reading groups emerged as valuable sites of learning for EAP teachers – an alternative to more formal, top-down CPD activities. In this write-up we follow the definition of professional learning as self-directed, 'goal oriented and work related, that is, engaging in activities for gain or improvement and towards transformation' (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, p.7). The reading groups explored in our conversations served as invaluable entry points to a new community facilitating both relational and knowledge building opportunities while allowing us a good degree of autonomy to control the direction of our professional growth. In this sense, they facilitated not only personal gain but also transformation. Equally important is their potential to act as bridges connecting practitioners' prior knowledge, experience and interest with their current EAP practice. In the field marked by a wide variety of professional expertise and experience of its practitioners, this aspect of reading groups can contribute to the process of building affinity with the field, allowing newcomers to envisage their place in it.

## STEPPING STONE 2. DEVELOPING AS AN EAP PRACTITIONER

Following on from the autonomy and agency building potential of reading groups introduced in Stepping Stone 1, Stepping Stone 2 explores some of the difficulties we have faced in the context of professional development and the role of reading groups as sites of resistance and resilience to encroachments on our professional identity.

**Iwona:** Little has been published on feminism in EAP, so I've recently joined a school-wide reading group on feminist pedagogies. I enjoy the texts and the different perspectives colleagues teaching other modern languages and literature bring to the group.

**Lucy:** How do you find the time to read? Some friends and I were commenting on this the other day, with workload pressures, so many admin tasks, along with the distractions of everyday life, we rarely have time.

**Iwona:** I read mostly on public transport, in the evenings and on my 'days' off' (I work part-time). Working from home helps. I can focus and read more. Learning new stuff energises me and helps me avoid burning out. I hate feeling like a hamster in a wheel doing the same over and over again.

**Lucy:** I didn't read the texts but wanted to attend your reading group because I really felt like the past 3 years had crushed all my creative energy out of me. I needed to get that feeling of possibility back again after floundering about in what felt like a hopeless system for so long. I went because I needed it and because it would be good for me. I had really struggled to read again after the pandemic and reading groups don't generally appeal because I never have the time to do what I need to. When work piles up, CPD is the first thing to be shelved as it isn't essential for teaching.

**Christine:** This is such a challenge. There's never enough time, but somehow everything still has to get done – for us to be able to do our jobs well though we *need* outlets like these to inspire us and keep us going, nobody gets into teaching just for the paycheck/as a 9-5, it's clear we're able to do our jobs better/more productively with this support and these connections. Reading groups are such a good way to ('make us'!) read things we might not (or might not be able to) carve out time to otherwise/be aware of.

**Kashmir:** In a time-poor professional life, the BALEAP conference reading group was an impetus to read the papers for me. In my experience, reading groups are great CPD opportunities, but I would suggest building time to read within the session, especially in the light of the gender disparities in academic life. I'd argue that the overwhelming burden is faced by women, particularly who also have to manage caregiving responsibilities both within and outside (childcare, parents, family illnesses) the academy. I have found and still find it challenging navigating the contradictory demands in my personal life and my work life.

**Iwona:** EAP seems a women dominated profession, but so little is written/discussed about our circumstances, our sensitivities, our perceptions of this work and where we want to take it forward. Bar one special issue, JEAP is silent on the subject...EAP appears to have no gender, but perhaps it's gender blind? Does it assume we all have the same struggles, challenges and costs when combining teaching and research? That we have similar space and time for the occluded yet expected work to progress in our careers? Are we judged the same by our students? Do male colleagues think about what to wear depending on who they teach? I know I do. Yolandas text and presentation on feminism encourage us to speak up. I'm no expert on care, emotions or feminism but the chance to discuss what many, if not most, consider as existing on the fringes of EAP was a strong motivation to propose a reading group at the conference.

**Christine:** I also expected to feel a little on the fringes of the conference presenting on teacher wellbeing, but I was so surprised that so much of what I was doing was reflected – directly or indirectly – in the work of so many others. Maybe we need to change our language here, by describing these topics as on the fringes of EAP, we are surely contributing to this narrative? (Noting of course that I initially positioned/said something very similar in my first reflection too) Maybe we need to claim better the center ground - certainly these issues, questions, concerns are present already, regardless of how and the extent to which they feel a part of the conversation.

## REFLECTION

Reading groups emerged in our conversations as CPD opportunities able to re-energise practitioners, channel intellectual curiosity and facilitate collaborative opportunities, such as this write-up. In their investigation of 171 teachers in 27 countries, Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) found that opportunities to stay abreast of the developments in the field and to share knowledge, skills and experience are highly valued by the EAP teachers. Apart from for knowledge building purposes, reading groups can also serve an important function of connecting practitioners interested in a particular area, which in the case of lesser explored topics, such as those selected for this reading group – care, emotions and feminism – can alleviate teachers' sense of isolation. Indeed, we discovered that it was precisely our interest in those 'fringes' that helped us find each other and that also brought us closer to colleagues in other disciplines who shared similar passions. Cross-boundary encounters between members of different communities of practice have been proven to generate new insights, innovation and reflection, enriching both/all communities (Wenger et al., 2015). Developing niche interests and seemingly resisting orthodoxies in the EAP knowledge base, which for many years have favoured a linguistic over a social focus (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Riazi et al., 2020), may be a sign of the disconnect between EAP research and EAP practice (Ding, 2022) becoming less profound and the field approaching maturity. This opportunity is, however, threatened by the pressures on EAP practitioners to ringfence time themselves to realise their potential, with institutional support for this often lacking (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Ding & Monbec, 2024). This and other challenges are explored further in the following stepping stone.

### STEPPING STONE 3. GENDERED EXPERIENCES: TENSIONS AND POWER STRUGGLES

Many comments in our conversations highlighted tensions around power dynamics at play not only in our interactions with our communities of practice and wider institutions but also with the focal texts themselves (Benesch, 2020; Cerdá, 2022; Tuck, 2018). Although the concepts of care, emotions and feminism stimulated intense discussions, frequently evoked were also feelings of self-doubt and apprehension about not having the expertise to speak with authority about topics and ideas introduced in the texts, as well as frustration with what we understood as gendered experiences and practices.

**Lucy:** For me, reading groups bring back all those memories of sitting in a seminar, knowing you hadn't done the work and dreading being called on for an opinion. Worse – you've done the reading, but you didn't understand it and as soon as you speak everyone will know you're stupid!

**Iwona:** Somehow this has not worried me much in the reading groups I've been part of. Maybe because I wanted to attend or knew the organisers...

**Kashmir:** Despite doing the planning for the reading group... I think I'd still be feeling apprehensive and vulnerable having to give my take on the articles... particularly, if it was contrary to the consensus.

**Christine:** The relational aspect of teaching (including reading groups and collaborative spaces like this where we're learning from each other) are so critical. Knowing and trusting who we're talking to is so important.

**Kashmir:** Yes, especially because we may have different perspectives on the concepts of 'care' and 'emotional labour'. It is not uncommon to hear that caring for students is not our role.

**Lucy:** Yes! Many EAP colleagues talk about the students 'not being up to it', needing to have their 'hands held' and apparently this isn't acceptable. The ones who are more flexible and understanding tend to be younger, junior women, or casualised staff. And their attitude towards the students inclines them to make more time, offer more tutorials and have an open-door policy which impacts their workload. This then impacts on their own career progression. It's a vicious circle.

**Kashmir:** This narrow view of the concept of care grated with me as it was the antipathy of my understanding. My understanding of the concept has been dismissed before which raised strong emotions in me.

However, then I didn't feel I was in a space I could counter the assertion. I think I would now.

**Iwona:** Equaling care with 'mothering' can be weaponised against us and diminish the value of our work with students while adding tons of real but invisible (and so unpaid) workload to our already busy schedules. Some say that centering care in EAP work replaces our expertise as language educators and makes our work seen as inferior to 'regular' academic work. There seems to be a larger issue of undervaluing care at the societal level not just academic or disciplinary, so how can we confidently place care at the heart of EAP (where I feel it belongs – Tuck asserts too that it's a central academic value)?

**Lucy:** This is not very thoroughly thought through, but there are limits to what an institution can offer in terms of care. Institutions are uncaring by their very nature. Universities talk about being welcoming and inclusive but it's people who do that, not systems. You can't simply get a marketing executive to create some nice, shiny leaflets saying you are caring without providing (and caring for) the staff that do that work. League tables, institutional awards, promotions processes are all to some extent competitive and exclusionist and add to workloads, anxiety and stress, taking time away from the work of education, which is what we are all here to do.

**Iwona:** That's where Benesch can help - the main premise being that emotions are not just individual feelings, but they are indicators of structural challenges and barriers. It helped me see my own work-related emotions differently. I channeled my feelings into actions. Voluntary work with the SIG and scholarship are my sites of resistance.

**Lucy:** This is the key. Resisting the pressure is so hard though, especially if you are already beaten down and exhausted. Part-time, precariously employed, disabled, junior staff all have a hard time pushing back. I turned my attention to being the one to try and help support them but did it through my union and EDI work. It was the only space I could find.

**Kashmir:** I think the point Benesch makes about emotion labour (I'd add 'care' here too) as a signal for change and teacher activism is significant. However, in reality would this engender a positive response? Would tutors be brave/strong enough to take up this mantle? Many colleagues talk informally about their dissatisfaction about e.g. policies, practices etc...but are reluctant to voice these concerns/dissatisfactions in a formal settings or on the record. It appears going against the 'orthodoxy', putting your head above the parapet is full of emotions...

**Lucy:** Women in my institution largely do this work....and it is work. We had some excellent senior women there, but they were often

outnumbered and outgunned by executive committees, bureaucratic processes and excessive workloads themselves.

**Iwona:** Feminist texts and theories are relatively new to me. However, at this stage of my personal and professional life – I am very much listening to what feminists are saying. I only now understand that the struggles which I have experienced since returning to work as a mother, are some of the barriers they have been fighting against for years. It's a very personal pathway to feminism for me but I'm catching up.

**Lucy:** I am fortunate because feminist and postcolonial theory is my academic background. I am so lucky to have these frameworks to help me. What I am finding out (and loving) is that EAP uses them too and that there is a place for them is helping to maintain my enthusiasm for this type of work.

**Christine:** It feels high time I increase my 'feminist literacy' – I argue/advocate along these lines a lot I think, without feeling at all qualified to do so and I think maybe sometimes unconsciously too...?

**Iwona:** When a colleague called me a feminist, I was surprised. 'I'm passionate about women's rights but does this make me a feminist?' I thought. Working through this was an interesting process. Reading Fraser and hooks helped me a lot. I'm ok with it now.

**Christine:** It does make me feel something of a fraud – what do I know about feminism? I don't think it's necessary AT ALL to know the literature etc. to *know* something (what's that saying – good teachers know far more about teaching than researchers could ever teach them), but I suppose I'm wondering, what are all the things about feminism that I don't know that I don't know?

**Kashmir:** I am proud to be a feminist (despite its pejorative connotations by some sections of society) ... as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie asserts..."We Should All Be Feminists"... however, it can be difficult to feel empowered when dealing with males who have difficulty in taking instruction from a female.... and suppress or attempt to silence their voice.

**Lucy:** I have had instances where male colleagues have mocked me for my 'feminist' views in meetings and pretended to be worried about what I would say. When I was younger and a bit less jaded, I would laugh along, but now I channel Sara Ahmed's Feminist Killjoy and really try and ruin the party!

**Iwona:** I wish I had more courage... and more imagination – I constantly read about and listen to ideas of how we can live differently but I'm aware that I internalised a great deal of what is and has been.

**Christine:** It's also about having the vocabulary/discourse to be able to present ideas in a way that will be 'heard' by those we might want to hear it.

**Lucy:** This is interesting. I share this worry. That I won't use the right term, or I will not be able to make my argument if I don't know the theory. But in my union work I came across lots of activists whose lack of theoretical background made little difference to their understanding of the important issues. This is where there is sometimes a dividing line between practitioners and theorists. I don't think we should be afraid to walk that line rather than try and cross over it into one camp or another.

**Christine:** From a gender perspective it's lovely to be doing this together as four women, it's rare to have the opportunity to collaborate like this, a group of experienced women with such a mix of backgrounds and experiences and to be able to learn from each other, especially in this special (if hard earned/difficult to carve out!) space that's allowing us to step back from 'the everyday'. It's an unanswerable hypothetical, but I've been wondering how the dynamic might be different had any men responded to the invitation too. Arguably not a useful thought experiment but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't come back to it a few times to mull it over, it would be really interesting to see how our conversations and reflections on some of these topics might have been encouraged and/or opened up in different directions...

**Rob [as we hope other readers will as well, to our joy, one of the reviewers of this article joined in our conversation here too]:** I did consider joining the session, actually, but had a sense of FOMO for the other sessions I would be missing (as it was longer than the usual presentations) and I also felt that it wasn't really directed towards me as a man - having read your reflection however, I realise that was wrong!

## REFLECTION

Doubtless care, emotion and feminism each offer unique and valuable lenses through which to examine all aspects of EAP labour. Our discussions through these lenses highlighted the challenges most of us have had related to our (perhaps wrongly perceived) limited capital to discuss them authoritatively. Similar sentiments have been expressed in relation to, for instance Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and its application to EAP practice (Monbec, 2022); however, as was argued in the case of SFL, the process of actively engaging with the theory and its possible applications in one's practice can result in an increased sense of agency and satisfaction (ibid). We believe that through the less formal

and practitioner-driven sites of learning, such as BALEAP's ResTes events, Theory into Practice meetings or reading groups, EAP practitioners can explore theories and their relevance for their practice. Chiming with previous stepping stones, the sometimes fraught development of EAP practitioners' self-efficacy, expertise and identities (e.g. Taylor, 2019) is here exacerbated by a sense of not being heard and acting within what can sometimes feel to be uncaring institutions (amidst the conspicuous lack of focus on positive institutions in published work, for an exception see e.g. Budzińska & Majchrzak, 2021). The reading group on care, emotions and feminism at the conference (and this follow-up collaboration) provided us a forum to resist some of these external pressures and vocalise those we internalised living in gendered (and in other ways) unequal societies. As reading groups hold relational as well as knowledge building potential (Himelein & Anderson, 2020), they can create a learning environment where practitioners can build each other up and connect with others while developing new meanings and experiences over ideas that truly matter to them professionally. Creating room for such spaces in conference situations, in particular, is argued to be critical to support the development of alternative narratives and to help amplify varied voices and experiences (Fairchild et al., 2021).

#### **STEPPING STONE 4. COMMUNITY, BELONGING AND FINDING A HOME**

Although many of our discussions – including many not included in this paper – involved discussion of difficult experiences in relation to our experiences of care, emotions and feminism, a final stepping stone we continually found ourselves returning to stand on was the unparalleled opportunities reading groups could offer to support the development of community and belonging.

**Iwona:** I left the room [after the session] with mixed feelings and bracing myself for the next two sessions that day, but then something wonderful happened. Kashmir, you spoke to me outside the room and then I think Lucy joined too. And some other colleagues reached out through the rest of the conference. Some wanted more reading group sessions, and one encouraged me to run an event dedicated to feminism 😊

**Kashmir:** Yes, our conversation buoyed me up and perked my interest as I'd missed the reading group. Initially, I had inadvertently ended in the wrong seminar room and subsequently, I wasn't brave enough to enter the reading group session... I also hesitated as it triggered emotions of anxiety and confusion about whether I had anything of value to say, having been 'silenced' before...so it was wonderful to have the

opportunity to assert my voice. Thank you again Iwona for inviting me to contribute and welcoming me to the community.

**Christine:** Whether collaborations (like this write-up) come from a reading group or not, just realising that there are others at a conference with similar interests does a huge amount to build community/a sense of belonging. In a strange way this reading group felt like a siren call towards 'my people' at the conference. A bit dramatic, admittedly, but I think the relational aspect, wanting to meet new people – to learn about their experiences, views, ideas, in relation to the topics of the suggested articles, this is what I was hoping for.

**Iwona:** I felt that too. Validation that I'm not alone – research into belonging is so fascinating – so hard to pinpoint or measure it but we all know when we feel it and when we don't.

**Lucy:** At BALEAP 2019 in Leeds I was in a good place. I felt like I was 'on a roll', I was loving my job again, and I had finally found my niche and my people! I wanted to try and get that feeling back and looking for themes I was interested in might steer me back there.

**Kashmir:** I can relate to this...finding my people/tribe...to enable one to thrive and not merely survive.

**Iwona:** Such a powerful statement 😊 Finding our tribe(s) can be so liberating and empowering... My whole point of running the group was to find like-minded people who want to explore such ideas in their practice and research. And I did!

**Kashmir:** Like-minded as in empathetic, encouraging and supportive and who challenge your thinking/understandings without making you feel small and diminished; colleagues who make you feel valued and empowered. To be honest, the whole idea of a 'reading group' on a wider scale, beyond one's immediate colleagues, at the conference appealed very much. We need collaboration not competition and spaces where everyone can thrive, including spaces for this falling outside our immediate departments and institutions too.

**Lucy:** I did feel connected to my immediate team for a while, but then key members left and the outsourcing of my programmes happened. The loss of that connection was one of the driving factors to me leaving that job. I was very wounded by the lack of care my old institution showed me and my colleagues. I am hoping for better in my new one!

**Christine:** This is all such powerful wording. 'We need collaboration not competition'. There was such an interesting variety of people at the conference with different roles and backgrounds in and related to EAP

(including among us here collaborating for this write up). It gives the potential to lead to really *meaningfully* interesting discussions.

**Iwona:** This reading group created a link between my individual thoughts and pursuits, and my professional community. What drove me was a deeply rooted need to share the texts with other EAP teachers and hear their take on them. If I'm fascinated by them, maybe others will be too? One person would be enough for me 😊

**Kashmir:** I think collaborations bring joy, structure and satisfaction. The last few scholarship projects I've been involved with have been collaborations and one aspect of collaborations has involved reading and discussion...so one has a responsibility to ensure time is made for the reading to enable one to contribute to the discussion and take equal responsibility in the project...plus it's wonderful to be learning simultaneously too.

**Iwona:** And I also want to bring Benesch's view of emotions as indicative of wider social structures, both barriers and enablers. Emotions we experience collaborating with others: teaching, researching, co-writing materials, or running a reading group, matter. Working cultures are important. They can help teachers and EAP units to thrive (or not). That's why I loved your presentation on collective wellbeing, Christine! The joy of working together, learning from one another, feeling connected and having your tribe are so worth exploring and that's what I would like to do.

**Christine:** Thank you! :) For me too, joy especially is something I connect with opportunities for collaboration. I've so loved exploring these questions this year, making a conscious decision to focus on wellbeing and understanding/exploring this (even with the very difficult conversations/stories that it brought to light) has been healing for me in its own right. This writeup has been making me question what the point of a conference is - is a conference not in large part a community building exercise? If so, sessions that can foster dialogue, meeting new people, more informally creating *spaces* where people can chat - if this is a big reason to run an international conference (?), then these 'alternative' formats have so much to offer? Arguably - devil's advocate - more to offer even than strings of individual presentations...

**Lucy:** However, I am cautious about spaces which purport to be about making connections and bringing people together, but actually end of being another thing which people feel they 'must' engage with or fall by the wayside. I really think the only way to make space for these valuable opportunities to connect is by literally making space...this comes down to

workload, time and physical space. Things which universities are constantly squeezing, sadly.

**Christine:** There's so much truth in this comment... Sadly – this is a theme that I think we've all mentioned in one way or another. Whether at a conference or elsewhere, the existence/title of a 'reading group' seems to be an important protector or guardian of time and space to read and meet together.

**Iwona:** EAP is a teaching intensive profession and our 'working time' is so monetised – anything that takes us away from what generates monetary value to institutions is seen as unnecessary (or a threat) and we need to argue its value to us and our students. By giving reading groups time and space, the conference organisers made reading visible and underscored the importance of reading groups being worthy of such valuable space. Let's hope future organisers will share this belief.

## REFLECTION

The critical importance of belonging to human functioning is long recognised: Autonomy, competence and *relatedness* are three basic psychological needs required to support motivation, performance and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Our reflections made clear the importance of relatedness at different levels (and some of the consequences, positive and negative, when we do and do not feel this): our sense of relatedness with our immediate colleagues, with others interested in/researching similar areas, and with the wider field of EAP as a whole (this returns also to the importance of socialisation into the field and identity building in EAP). Reading groups can help us 'find our tribe' and this collaborative write-up (and the relationships underpinning it) is an example of a community developed from such a protected space approaching its fullest potential. Reading groups can also act as 'counter-sites' (Foucault, 1986) to more traditional professional development spaces where EAP practitioners can challenge existing power structures and discourses, creating opportunities for developing knowledge as well as social networks. Including, as noted previously, in conference spaces (Fairchild et al., 2021) However, for such liminal spaces of resistance and possibility to realise their radical potential, they require both support and autonomy.

## THE END OF THE START OF THE CONVERSATION

Mirroring the way in which we have highlighted a series of stepping stones traversed rather than a set of 'findings', so too have we

consciously not labelled this section 'Conclusion'. Instead, we share some concluding thoughts, hoping that discussion will continue and that others may join by running or researching reading groups and engaging with the concepts of care, emotions and feminism in their EAP practice

Complementary to the four stepping stones we traversed in our discussions, we were aware of three binding elements that we felt tied together our experiences and the stories we shared together. These were the *gendered nature of our experiences*, the *significance of time and protected spaces for self-directed CPD*, and the *importance of care* (viewed broadly, including care for ourselves, for colleagues, for students, for our institutions, for the field of EAP). These are naturally a reflection of our particular collective experiences. As others join the conversation, we look forward to seeing other elements emerge as important that may not be apparent here or that our personal narratives may have overlooked.

In this collaboratively written contribution), we have sought to highlight the value of collaborative reading for the development of EAP practitioners and their field, and the particular value of such spaces in relation to opening up dialogue around EAP theory and practice to consider, critique and potentially welcome as yet lesser explored topics. There is a strong need for support, both financial and institutional, to foster collaboration and professional development. If a central function of an international conference for any association or group is to facilitate the opportunity not only to share knowledge but to connect with others and develop meaningful relationships, reading groups certainly are one way to protect the time and space required to achieve this.

We hope that in 2025 BALEAP will again consider ringfencing space for alternative formats, including reading groups, within the conference programme, and we look forward in particular to seeing understudied topics and issues proposed for discussion – from this perspective, we hope that care, emotions and feminism will not be among them.

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## Notes

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