

## To Know or to Understand One Another: Developing New Identities Through International Teaching

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, a veteran K-12 art educator shares the experience of relocating to teach internationally for the first time. The stark differences from previous experience created opportunities for reflection, and thus the melding of professional and personal identity in the international teaching community are explored in brief narratives as an autoethnographic study. Highlighted is the difference in the drive to understand another person/people, as opposed to the efforts to know a lot about another person/people.

**KEYWORDS:** international teaching, autoethnographic study, personal identity, professional identity, chàbuduō\*, yàomiànzi\*, knowing, understanding

\*pinyin spelling of Chinese words

The moment I step into the stairwell of my apartment building, I become an *other*. I am a particularly tall, large, and cisgender woman from the United States of America. I often hear locals refer to me as “*měiguó*” in Mandarin, meaning United States of America, or simply as “*American*” by those who choose to speak English. As such, I employ these two terms for the purposes of self-identification in daily interactions (Martinez-Carter, 2013). My European ancestry presents physically in my blue eyes and light brown hair. I am easily recognized as a cultural, racial, ethnic, and political minority in most spaces I enter. Attentive gazes meet at eye level with nearly everyone I pass, but after months here it feels odd to smile. My neighbors and I are not established acquaintances even after a year, likely because of our shared failure to recognize other ethnic groups’ facial features (Zhao, Hayward, & Bulthoff, 2014). Passing so many people without interaction betrays my outgoing personality. Exposed as unlike, I walk to school a few short blocks beyond my neighborhood.

The art studio is as much a retreat for me now in midlife as it was in my youth. The art students and I learn and create together in a private, non-profit international school in the third ring of Chengdu, in the Sichuan Province of the People’s Republic of China. It is here that I have the time, space, and outlet to explore my new professional setting while teaching secondary classes on conceptual

art and collagraphs. I can already feel how my professional identity is shifting. There was one exact moment that I realized change was needed to better serve my students.

While reviewing proper paint brush cleaning, I reached for a cup to pantomime procedures as an art teacher. I had no idea what to call this container and looked to the class for clarity. I could not read the words and the label on the cup. “Is this yogurt?” I asked the group. A few students nodded, and a few others smiled. The rest gave no response at all. “Okay great, you’ll just grab your trusty yogurt cup to...” and completed my demo. It was only when I saw a student reach into her lunch bag, retrieve her own yogurt, and pour its contents down the sink that I realized the need for precise communication. I also recognized an opportunity to document my growth as an educator.

### New Research in a New Land

The significant changes in my personal life were amplified by becoming a member of a tightly-knit community of colleagues that lived and worked with me in the same community. My only acquaintances were colleagues and students, and my new school position demanded much of my free time. My work and social lives were melding into one international living reality. As I looked to investigate others’ experience of a similar culmination of change, I was unable to find relevant existing research. I decided to devise a research study of my own so that I could reflect upon these significant transitions as they occurred.

The path to writing about myself and those around me as a form of research (Denshire, 2014) first developed from limited accessible resources. While the People’s Republic of China permitted me the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to surmount national censorship for educational purposes, many sites remained off-limits. There was also an ongoing concern with copyright and proper authorship between academic journals and databases in China (Johnson, 2013). This left little guarantee that I could correctly cite authors or studies that I had not already verified in my own previous research.

Another difficulty to my investigation was the timing of The 19th Communist Party Congress. Security measures for this nationwide governmental summit caused enormous internet connectivity and accessibility issues for well over a month. The government required internet providers to perform internet emergency shutdown drills, and surveillance was greatly increased (Connor, 2017). My existing resources from previous studies, which were housed online, were unavailable.

## Autoethnography of Personal and Professional Identities

At this same time, classes were well underway in the first semester, and I regularly worked on my visual art journal during school days. I started the process to model art-making with my students, but soon noticed that my pages had begun to touch on topics that were relevant to my professional and personal transitions. The percentage of each page devoted to text had increased. I obviously had thoughts and feelings that were ripe for reflection. Knowing that there was more to my personal and professional identity shifts than I felt could be properly processed in my visual art journal pages, I turned to various forms of qualitative research that place the researcher in a participatory role within an environment. I sought a methodology in which I could analyze my space and relationships as a member of a school community (my professional identity). I wished to simultaneously track my attempts to adjust to life as a *měiguó* in China with local Chinese individuals apart from my school-made relationships (my personal identity).

Thus, an autoethnographic study of my professional and personal identities evolved. Autoethnography met my needs as a researcher, and also gave me freedom to extend my anecdotal experiences to connect to cultural and social contexts. Autoethnography also places the researcher in a highly reflective role (Méndez, 2013), which was my main goal for both my relocation and my desire to conduct research. I was actively participating in success, struggles, and totally unforeseen experiences in expatriate life despite my preparation. I saw autoethnography as a call to not only recognize aspects of my new life, but to reflect upon my choices and influences within each aspect. Holman-Jones (2005) commends autoethnographic research which shows through telling, navigates self-protection in sharing, and acknowledges that all information gained as a representation within an environment is constantly in flux. I was motivated to use this study to evaluate my own actions and reactions (Duncan, 2004), but also very interested in finding perspectives that were new to me even after researching others' accounts.

Conducting quality research amid personal and professional disarray was the real challenge. My growing cultural knowledge was consistent only in its inevitable revisions. Eisner (1991) argues the usefulness of such research to present probabilities to future reviewers. Though I was overwhelmed at the self-imposed responsibility of maintaining neutrality and validity in this study, I was eager to challenge my own concepts and investigate my own preconceptions. Researching within so many structures at play was going to require vulnerability, proper respect to the significance of outside factors, and regular assessments of the underlying causes of my developing perspectives (Pfeiler-Wunder, 2017). I wanted

to remain honest in my experiences and represent developments accurately. I aimed to interpret as accurately as I was able even through the challenge of retelling (Clough, 1998). I prepared my study realizing that complete objectivity was not a reasonable goal for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I aimed instead toward research I was familiar with, seeking experiences that I could reflect upon authentically.

## Authentic Self-Research

Having previously researched preservice art educators in student teaching placements (Barbee, 2015), I created a direct connection to the framework of adult learning explored by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015). I set goals for my own development, noting similarities to my current professional transition while entering the art education profession for the first time. I planned to observe situational differences affecting growth and my personally-held norms and perspectives as they changed. I could reflectively observe my own experience as an emerging international educator. I connected the concepts of andragogy to the research methodology of autoethnography, drawn to my established habit of narrative work in my journal (Parker-Fuller, 2000). I had a desire to conduct research upon myself within new sociocultural realities (Reed-Dehaney, 1997).

To collect data on my professional life, I established that all topics relating to my classroom performance would involve detailed note-taking and reflection. I scheduled various observations of colleagues in the arts department to witness their style of engagement. I connected with internationally-placed teachers at nearby schools who were interested in professional development. To track my personal growth and change, I kept note of conversation topics with my distant family and friends, as related to them via our regular email exchanges. I joined several expatriate social media groups and followed similarly-related blogs. I also contributed to a podcast cohort of U.S. born educators living and working worldwide, started by a friend in Ghana. I actively chose to research events and connections that occurred naturally. While I did want to pay attention to the changes occurring in my life and dual identities, I chose to engage in what Ellis and Bochner (2006) describe as a more evocative autoethnographic study. As opposed to more conservative and analytical approaches (Wall, 2008), I wanted to offer my accounts as factually as possible, while acknowledging my own perceptions and desire to improve as an art educator. Giving myself these freedoms and limitations, I set to research my personal and professional identity shifts as an experienced U.S.-born teacher in her first year living and teaching in China.

## Being Inside: Emerging Dimensions of Self

I genuinely, perhaps arrogantly, had thought myself prepared to be immersed in a new culture for the first time. I relied on inelegant translations from my phone to communicate, or even more awkwardly uttered poor atonal Mandarin. Physical gestures were of little use when I first tried to communicate, as these are also culturally and regionally derived. Such misunderstandings provide amusing tales from short-term travel, but prove overwhelming as regular trials of a new life. I developed a great deal more humility by being so regularly unsuccessful. In my home, I was constantly confronted by reminders of a new personal life, like the unfamiliar shape, smell, and label of the dish liquid. I spent my time washing dishes contemplating when I would feel that I knew what I was doing.

I made a distinct effort to give attention to the changes in my westernized concepts of ordinary. What I have known as the sound of an approaching ice cream truck in the United States was a pleasant signal to clear the way for the street-cleaning vehicles in Chengdu. Foot and vehicular traffic flowed in a water-like manner, and offense was not taken as quickly as in the United States. While the people in Chengdu were friendly and helpful, they were not overly familiar, as I often experience in the United States. The week I arrived in Chengdu, a new acquaintance named Hope offered to help me set up my online ordering account. Two days after we met, she was in my living room late at night, holding my credit card and talking on my phone to arrange home-delivery goods. After helping me, she refused to stay for tea, but has messaged me regularly since then. We quickly connected on the social media platform WeChat. It was several weeks before Hope changed my access to her “stories” and allowed me to see her posts. In the United States, I had been accustomed to connecting with full access on all social media immediately upon meeting new people. Here, there was a maintenance of distance that allowed my Chinese friends and I to understand one another as individuals rather than by our affiliations or leanings. I was familiar with Hope’s sense of humor and favorite snacks before I knew her opinions on current events.

After a few months of living in Chengdu, I realized many of my frustrations came from inexperience in a large city rather than my new country. I had never lived in such a densely populated area. I approached problem-solving with a new rhythm and patience. I soon located the best vegetable stand in the neighborhood and connected with the corner store to regularly deliver drinking water. It took months for me to adjust to purchasing only a few days’ items at a time, and even longer to overcome the anxiety of a running to-do list. Stopping myself from seeking new norms brought a lot more appreciation to my daily thoughts. Where I would have previously

identified as a rational pessimist, these personality traits did not serve me or lead me to any understanding of my adjusting life. I came to love the orange-candy smell of soaking dishes in my efficiently-sized kitchen.

This timeline ran concurrently with my adjustment to a new teaching and learning environment at school, though it became evident early on that success in one realm did not necessarily translate to any progress in the other. My newer personal identity factors, those of an expatriate *měiguó* and one of 14 million inhabitants in this Chinese city, began forming in one consistent arch of conversion through deeper understandings and realizations. Experience had adjusted my perceptions and helped me develop my personal identity. I did not experience the same steady flow in my professional identity change.

## Being Outside: Interpreting Pragmatism and Perfectionism

In Chengdu, I was particularly surprised to see how strongly people believe that different nationalities exude separate and distinct personality traits (Jarrett, 2017). Social bias is by no means unique or unfounded in scientific research (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), and can often lead one to prejudice (Fiske, 2014). As an American in China, I actively worked to prevent the clichés I knew of various Chinese cultures from shaping my perceptions. Counter to my efforts and expectations, I quickly deduced that speaking on stereotypes was somehow more acceptable commentary in a professional setting than I had known them to be in the United States. Colleagues and students openly offered analysis on my size, shape, and age based on my nationality. An elementary school teacher, a U.S. citizen more experienced in international teaching than myself, shared a story with me at the back-to-school staff mixer. As he explained the problems he had faced with a housekeeper, he said: “You know how the Chinese have no problem-solving skills in real life scenarios.”

Hearing similar dialogue in many daily interactions with co-workers both foreign and local to Chengdu quickly broadened my knowledge base of stereotypes held by multiple different nationalities. Through these various exchanges, I detected a real need for people to categorize one another, even if categorizations were achieved through incorrect generalizations and presumptions. My students were in disbelief that as a *měiguó* I had never owned a firearm and did not eat McDonald’s food at all. Once I complimented Hope on a lovely outfit she was wearing. Using the comment as a segue to my dowdy clothing, Hope offered to help me purchase a diet tea online that would slim me down since I was too large to fit into the more professional Chinese-sized and styled work clothing. It was then that I first learned that Americans are stereotyped as overly casual dressers (Clemente, 2015).

It is different to believe or propagate stereotypes of others than it is for a people to actively embrace and embody particular norms and concepts into their collective persona. For example, United States citizens consider themselves to be exceptionally hard-working (Reaney, 2015). In my limited observations, there are specific qualities that are widely embraced by Chinese natives. One such virtue is pragmatism. In its purest form, a pragmatic approach uses real solutions with a reliable and successful history. In the classroom version of this mentality, if an assignment is completed, the student's goal is accomplished. In my experience, after I delivered every lesson objective and purpose, hands immediately shot up with questions that began with "Can we just..." As we were engaging in art projects that branched beyond simple materials usage and into conceptual considerations, I did not initially appreciate the students' pragmatic suggestions. In my perception, the focus of the project was lost in the students' suggested edits. The regularity of these interruptions eventually led me to take pause and refocus anew. It took me a great deal of time to recognize that such requests or negotiations for projects did not originate from a lack of interest in meaningful engagement, but were offered as genuine solutions for quicker project completion.

### Practicality and Respectfulness

There is a term new international hires were taught and were told closely applies to a practical mentality: *chàbuduō*. As a direct translation, it means "nearly" or "almost." In its use in classrooms, *chàbuduō* can mean "good enough" and is sometimes used in that context, but also in the context of finding a practical means to an end. Often, an acceptable amount of imperfection or error is implied in this word. A comparable notion, popularized by Voltaire (1962) in *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, is "The perfect is the enemy of the good."

I was coming from an environment of high-stakes assessments and a focus on mastery in United States public schools (Kamenetz, 2015). The suggestions that students could possess the autonomy to direct their own most efficient learning and that perfection is not a necessity in class work were near revolutionary to me as a teacher. Fortunately, after some automatic resistance to students' input on my assignments, I could adjust to the flexibility. Student investment of time and attention to their assignments increased, as did the variation among the creations. I came to see the control I had uselessly employed; I had not been readily willing to hand over exploration. Power dynamics were unnecessary in our art studio. Not only was I in a setting that valued independent endeavor, but the students were growing rightly impatient with my regulation of our shared creative space. There was no lack of faith in their efforts; the problem was my perceived ownership of their possible failures. My own relinquishment of the

burden of success was the first significant adjustment I made teaching in this new school. Figuring out how to frame educational units to better allow space for both highly personal creativity and practical problem-solving was my second adjustment. I continued to re-gauge those balances with each unit I prepared for my students.

My Chinese students and I experienced other similar miscommunications involving a nuanced cultural archetype that I did not know. *Yàomiànzi*, a concern with saving face and maintaining reputation, is shared respect given to and expected from others. Keeping *yàomiànzi* in a setting where failure is meant to be acceptable (Smith & Henriksen, 2016) is a more profound and delicate balance than I had dealt with before. I found that when supporting students in making successful classroom choices, pupils seemed particularly concerned with criticisms. To encourage students to engage comfortably in dialogue and art-making and to avoid causing injury to any student's reputation, I needed to genuinely investigate my grasp of the students' perspectives. Giving proper weight to *yàomiànzi* was not merely my westernized norm of a "compliment sandwich" (two complements offered immediately before and after a criticism). Students were crestfallen when I directly referred to unmet objectives, even if they had been stated previously. Early in the year, I made a student tear-up by saying, "This is a great choice for your artist study, I think you'll have a lot of fun with it. Don't forget to double-check your proportions as we discussed, though. That top right branch seems a bit off." I had made that correction at full volume and essentially called her mistake to the attention of the class.

I also found that traditional art critiques created a swift death to any naturally productive dialogues between students. The class had enjoyed a unit sculpting creatures inspired by Roberto Benavidez's piñata interpretation of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Richman-Abduo, 2017). As we stood at a table surrounding our small creations, my attempts to engage students in conversation were met with looks down to feet and no acknowledgment of one another. After asking if anyone would like to talk about their own experience or their personal creation, one student named Jackie said simply, "I liked it." Two other students nodded in agreement with the statement, but not another person spoke. As I complimented the students on their choices and asked low-risk questions involving materials or features, they responded politely but did not engage with each other's work directly for the entire class period.

### Retelling and Reframing

I found it beneficial to mentally frame any suggestions or reminders to assignment guidelines as new ideas. I began to ask the students what could enhance their final product beyond its current success.

For class critiques, I created various technique or personal motivation questions that students could draw randomly from a hat and ask any student they preferred. It was tedious work murmuring to individual students (exactly as I had announced to the entire class moments ago). “While you work on this, you will want to consider proportions of the figure.” Scripted student interactions about their own work felt inauthentic. I worried that students might find this model disingenuous or overly controlling. Based on the students’ responses, however, it seemed that they felt supported in a more positive experience. Classes gave no indication that they felt they had made mistakes or fallen short of expectations.

We also broke the established norm that my opinions and commentary were the only ones of note in the class. Teaching experience has taught me that no student enjoys feeling that they have performed poorly, but the nuances of how to kindly engage in a conversation while maintaining dignity led me to a new level of dialogue with students. As we redeveloped our class critiques even further, we opted toward models that asked constructive questions, analyzing and building meaning as a group rather than scrutinizing any pieces individually. We also employed the “ask two friends” model for reviewing assignment guidelines or when questioning a next step. This practice of deferring the ultimate answer from myself and making space for students to guide one another led to more communication for the students. This shift also provided opportunities for me to witness and take note of preferred wordings of constructive advice.

It is interesting to note that as we all came together to teach and learn at an international school, students from the western hemisphere did not respond in the same way to these open dialogical constructs. These students often asked to review rubrics or requested that I share my preferences for specific changes. It seemed an equal challenge for them to be invited to articulate their own opinion on their creations as it was for me to leave suggestions unspoken. I also found that many of my Korean students, roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of our student body, operated more similarly with United States educational models that value total mastery and perfection. These students focused on excellent scores and preferred projects that exhibited high levels of craftsmanship and execution of skill. These students placed a high level of pressure on themselves to succeed, were less receptive to praise, and maintained a formality with me as an instructor that I was not familiar with anywhere else.

The culmination of so many different cultural norms in one creative setting was an invigorating challenge. I was humbled to see students of such a formative age working to navigate within these different constructs with a desire for inclusivity. My most substantial goal,

not unlike my efforts in previous teaching scenarios, was to foster an equal space and a creative haven for all the students sharing our art studio. In turn, I could see that the students were working to be vulnerable, attempting art with the possibility of failure, and offering one another praise and support. We were all respecting one another as developing artists and humans, trusting in each of us that our best is “good enough.”

### **Being Within: Communicating, Co-Building Context**

I arrived in China approximately six months into Donald Trump’s presidency. There was considerable friction between my concept of self and what students assumed of me. It was presumed that I had voted for President Trump. After dispelling that fallacy, I was then asked to offer rationale for the support he has received. Though in no way emotionally, historically, or contextually comparable, in these conversations, I felt acquaintance with examples of members of minority populations in the United States who are asked to represent the whole of their communities. I now recognize the lack of safety for people being questioned in this way.

In China, however, I found more genuine curiosity and less divisiveness than in the United States. Very quickly I learned to qualify that any responses to political, cultural, and national questions were my unique personal perspective and ought not to count as factual for the United States of America as a whole. This parameter was difficult to establish, but necessary. Students saw in me a prime interviewee in their classroom. I was forced to accept that my efforts to always remain neutral in responses were not enough to make me an official or fully-informed authority on my home country. Simply put, I did not have the right to instruct the students about the United States from my positionality while also in my professional role. After over 15 years in classrooms ranging from kindergarten to graduate school, I finally recognized one benefit to biting my tongue beyond exuding good manners: there was no need for anyone to know me with such familiarity. In the midst of creating this new life, the drive to know and be known is fading from my personality, professionally and personally. In kind, these students are under no obligation to share with me their positions or preferences, and if they do choose to share, it is not an invitation to weigh their values against my own.

The place we do connect is in the art studio, which is an increasingly safe space to engage meaningfully with one another. Taking the personal out of our artistic creations is not a plausible or desirable goal. However, in our work and interactions, we aim for our efforts and creations to be understood. One case in point came from a piece made by a sophomore named Kerry. We could recognize and discuss his work, a reimagination of Coolidge’s (1903) dogs playing poker

piece, *A Bold Bluff*. Kerry replaced cards with mahjong tiles, dogs with unicorns, and a neon beer sign with a rainbow. While classmates discussed recent changes in China's stance on homosexuality during a critique, Kerry's stance on LGBTQ+ rights in China was never addressed. Rather than exchanging personal details, these students placed a higher value on understanding one another in a more holistic, and in many ways more personal, manner.

One of the most prominent alterations to my professional identity was comedy. My reliance on humor in communication proved as erroneous as my need to be overly personal. Where laughter has decreased in the classroom, clarity has prevailed. I worked to restructure my thoughts to precise verbiage. Specifically, my use of idioms and culture-specific parlance were not only unhelpful, but also an annoying distraction in my communication with students. Though students were interested in the context of the phrases I used – idioms are a dynamic aspect to English-language acquisition (Göçmen, Göçmen, & Ünsal, 2012) – every accidental turn of phrase derailed our primary conversation. While much of my new professional identity felt beneficial and mentally stimulating, the loss of access to favored phrasings honestly felt like a loss to my unique personality. What was gained in idioms' absence was a well-needed development of neutral and non-valued sentence structures. These changes in discourse allowed for natural dialogue with introverted students and those speaking to me in their second or even third language. We compensated for what could be better said in a native tongue. The mutual respect and trust that we established while trying to be understood in our work and words lifted my spirits, but also held a mirror to my own biases. I remembered people lacking total command of the English language in my earlier teaching years. When conversing with former students and their parents, I had pantomimed large gestures, and opened my eyes more, speaking with my mouth wider and my words slower. What had made that acceptable to me before, and why did these students not find the same animation necessary when assisting me? These students offered considerate solutions to every simple issue I admitted to facing. It was obvious that my ineptitude was not perceived as a general lack of intelligence, but a moment that the community was familiar with and happy to assist me through.

### **Being Whole: Committing to Engagement**

Even with our various successes, students are sometimes baffled by my general concepts of the world, as I am by theirs. We agree to look beyond comparisons or contrasts. Of course, I have witnessed passionate arguments about favorite bands or sports teams, debates on current global issues, or the existence of a higher power. While there is all of this and more, as with any of the thousands of students

I have taught in the United States, what is absent is hostility and assumption of superiority over those of a differing opinion. Nor is there any notion of the need to assume an "other" among the students.

Similar to students' wish for an understanding of their artistic creations, there is a common attitude that it is worth engaging in differences to better understand one another. Thus far, it appears that among these students, there is a high value in access to one another. Indeed, there exist closer friendships, romances, and temporary feuds, but there is also a comradery that leaves no student unworthy of speaking to any other. There are no identifying factors in a group or individual significant enough to make one unacceptable to any other. There is an elusive "common ground" that this *mèiguó* can still not source, but I do believe it is, among these teens in this small private international school, in this vast city, in this large complex country, a real key to globalized education in our field as well as others.

These students have taught me how to approach other human beings as resources for learning and understanding. I know that this world could benefit from a lot more of that, and I can think of no better focus for my continued professional and personal development. To that end, I will continue to operate as a member of this collective and take the lead from those around me. Where I have previously felt the responsibility and ambition to guide situations around me, I have learned to take a receptive approach. I have less need to know or be known based on roles or accomplishments, and now value shared efforts toward understanding. While there will not be an acquisition, mastery, or completion to my personal and professional growth, this study has proven to me the value of reflexive practices.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The life changes of moving and working internationally came from a deep desire to grow and develop further as both a human being and as an educator, personally and professionally. Now one year from my arrival, I can accept that I will not acquire much conclusive knowledge of the people and cultures I have encountered here, not in the way that I feel I know my own nation's people and cultures. As I am physically, so too am I intellectually situated as an outsider learning about all that is around me by building upon my established (outside) contexts.

Some facets of international living are easy to associate with previous experiences. Meaningful exchanges and shared meaning-making has emerged as an important professional objective. However, my goal in this research – seeking to increase the stock of knowledge I carried with me to each new experience in order to improve – was faulty. As

educators, we must regularly choose to conclude less and investigate more. Many teachers would do well to mentally work against each new conclusion and maintain grasp on the very specific contexts that create each bit of information in the classroom setting. *Knowing* what to expect is relying upon my own previous information to estimate a probability. *Understanding* what is actively occurring in the art studio means gathering information without establishing expectations.

As educators, we may be drawn to new educational models or work toward position advancement. We may actively seek professional colleagues to exchange ideas. We can keep abreast of emerging trends and theory. These are all immensely beneficial to us individually and as a field, but I would argue that one must maintain a fresh eye and an effort to understand new information as it becomes available, rather than to know it as anything resembling a hard and fast truth. In the constant changes of understanding, we educators might also value the impermanence of our personal and professional identities.

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