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A VISUAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A PHD JOURNEY

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Abstract

Responding to a paucity of research student autoethnography in the law school, this piece introduces a visual autoethnographic resource in the form of an online, interactive computer game that describes my PhD ‘journey’. It explores the relevance and impact of how we do, talk, and think about our research projects on their success and on our wellbeing as researchers. It invites us to pay attention to the metaphors we use, identifying how these might empower or undermine, and offers an alternative framing that might support research students, especially those with disabilities in a wider context of shrinking support.

Key words: autoethnography, visualization, metaphor, student resource, legal research

[A] THE MOUNTAINS OF METAPHOR: A ‘SIDE QUEST’²

The way we talk matters. The words we choose and the concepts we invoke combine to shape the mental models that we use to make sense of the world. Metaphor, or the comparison of one phenomenon to another, is an important means through which we conceptualise (our) reality, and frame what we perceive, how, and why (Ortony 2008; Lakoff 1992).³ This relates equally to substantive legal research projects and to the ways in which we approach such projects. Metaphors,

¹ This paper, like the Mountains of Metaphor resource, is the result of the support, encouragement, and generosity of many people over many years. Firstly, to Professors Amanda Perry-Kessaris and Diamond Ashiagbor, whose willingness to consistently go above and beyond to support me enabled me to complete the PhD. I will forever be indebted to my mentor, who prefers to remain anonymous but who provided crucial guidance in helping me create the concepts and mental worlds that are set out here. In creating the Mountains of Metaphor online interactive game, I am indebted to Emily Allbon of tldr.legal for her support and encouragement, and to Howard Richardson and Tegan Harriss for turning my drawings and text into something magical. Thanks is owed to Professor Michael Palmer for the kind feedback on this piece. Last, but by no means least, I am grateful for the generous funding of the ESRC-SeNSS Postdoctoral Fellowship which has allowed me to both develop my PhD substantively as well as reflect on the journey leading to this point.

² The terms ‘main quest’ and ‘side quest’ are borrowed from the language of computer games where the ‘main quest’ or central storyline is supplemented by ‘side quests’ that do not progress the player through the game but offer a diversion. The metaphor is apt for academia where entire days can be lost to ‘side quests’ (admin, applications, reviews, networking, etc) when we might rather be focusing on the ‘main quest’ (completing the book draft, etc).

³ Theories of metaphor dispute its definition, although there is consensus that as the archetypal trope, metaphors are ‘class inclusion statements’ (Glucksberg and Keysar 2012).

so often ubiquitous to the point of invisibility, can both reveal and conceal, framing problems in such a way as to suggest a narrow list of potential solutions (Schön 2012). By paying attention, then, to *how* we talk about specific phenomena, we can gain insights into alternative responses. This piece explores the importance of metaphors in framing a PhD journey, offering an alternative metaphor that has been developed into an online, interactive game. Using my personal experience as data to ‘describe, analyse, and understand’ the ‘cultural experience’ of undertaking a PhD in law, this piece offers an autoethnographic, or ‘self-narrative’, account through the lens of a ‘journey’ metaphor to reflect both on the PhD, but also on the process of creating a resource about the PhD experience (Campbell 2016: 96).

In October 2019, I completed my ‘main quest’ by passing my doctoral viva without corrections. This brought an unexpectedly abrupt end to an eight-and-a-half-year journey that had seen elated highs and desperate lows, as well as several ‘side quests’ along the way. Chief among these, and the focus of this piece, was the development of a supportive and helpful working metaphor for approaching any sustained piece of research. In 2020, my working metaphor framework was developed into an online interactive computer game called ‘Mountains of Metaphor’ which is offered both as a reflective record of my own experiences, and as a guide for research students to develop their own metaphors that enable and support.⁴ This piece charts the development of the resource, its launch, and the feedback I have received, offering an autoethnographic account of the creation of both my time as a research student in the law school and of the creation of the resource. It sets these reflections in a wider context of shrinking support for students with disabilities, questioning how this cohort might be supported to become active yet reflective members of the scholarly community.

⁴ See <https://tldr.legal/resource/mountains-of-metaphor.html>



Figure 1: The Journey Begins (Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)

The Context: Metaphors and my ‘Main Quest’

‘Human thought processes are largely metaphorical’, and our ‘ordinary conceptual system’—how we think and act—relies on largely invisible metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6). Metaphor is so ubiquitous and deeply entrenched in our everyday communicative realities that we could not banish it even if we wanted to, but a recognition of the power of metaphors to frame our mental models is an essential element of analysing the world around us (McCloskey 1998; Geary 2011 Loc 771). Metaphor had been central not only to the side quest introduced in this piece, but to my ‘main quest’. The research focus of my PhD explored how we do, talk, and think about the relationships between law, economy, and society. In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, questions began to emerge about the whether the economy (and its regulation) was ‘embedded in’ society, or whether society had come to be ‘embedded in’ the economy (and its regulation) (Earle, Moran, and Ward-Perkins 2017; Raworth 2018). By exploring the relevance of these questions through an economic sociology of law (ESL) lens, I took a deep dive into our

ongoing use of one metaphor—‘embeddedness’—and its effects. As the core concept of ESL, this lens offers rich and illuminating insights into how embeddedness structures the way we perceive and analyse the nexus between law, economy, and society. While ubiquitous, the concept of embeddedness conceals as much as it reveals, functioning as a generative metaphor that frames the problem in such a way as to suggest a narrow range of solutions (Schön 2012). Moreover, our ongoing commitment to embeddedness allows the repetition of metaphors that have the analytical tools and normative preferences of neoliberalism ‘baked in’. In short, repetition of ‘embeddedness’, and the ontological metaphors of ‘the law’ and ‘the economy’ on which it depends, entrenches those mainstream ways of doing, talking, and thinking that had led us into the financial crisis in the first place. It became clear, then, that if we want to innovate in our responses to financial crashes, social crises, and environmental catastrophes, we need new vocabularies, grammars, and mental models that move us beyond limiting concepts like embeddedness. My PhD duly suggested an alternative, exploring how this might look and function in three empirical settings: academic research, policy formation, and lay discourse. Extending this awareness of metaphor from my research to my research *processes*, then, seemed natural.

[B] WHY VISUALIZE?

Metaphors, then, are ‘models of things rather than things in their own right’, and have the power to mislead just as much as they have the power to illuminate, inspire, rouse, or pacify (Lewis, cited in Geary 2011 Loc 2999). Visualisations of law, be this of substantive, procedural, methodological, or theoretical approaches, can also be understood as (visual) metaphors and offer an alternative way of apprehending or framing. There is a long history of making things visible, from the birth of the ‘wall of tariffs’ metaphor in the post-WWI economic reconstruction of Europe (Slobodian 2018), to the more recent ‘legal design’ movement to make legal rights and responsibilities accessible to all (Haapio and Hagan 2016; Hagan 2017; Hagan n.d.). In legal education, there has been a growing awareness of the utility of ‘making things visible and tangible’ both for the student and for the teacher (Allbon 2019; Allbon, McKee, and Doherty 2020; Perry-Kessaris 2020), and a recognition that visual approaches can construct ‘enabling ecosystem[s]’ for approaching legal problems and their solutions (Perry-Kessaris 2020). By visualising, we can simultaneously bring ‘practical-critical-imaginative mindsets’ to bear, offering alternative points of entry and perspectives (Perry-Kessaris 2020). In a pedagogical

context, such approaches can open up alternative channels of communication. In a research context, they allow reflection on complex issues that can reveal alternative connections, links, and relationships (Williams 2021a). Finally, visual and creative approaches can offer a means of communication that sidesteps some of the limitations of linguistic framing that my ‘main quest’, described above, was beginning to uncover.



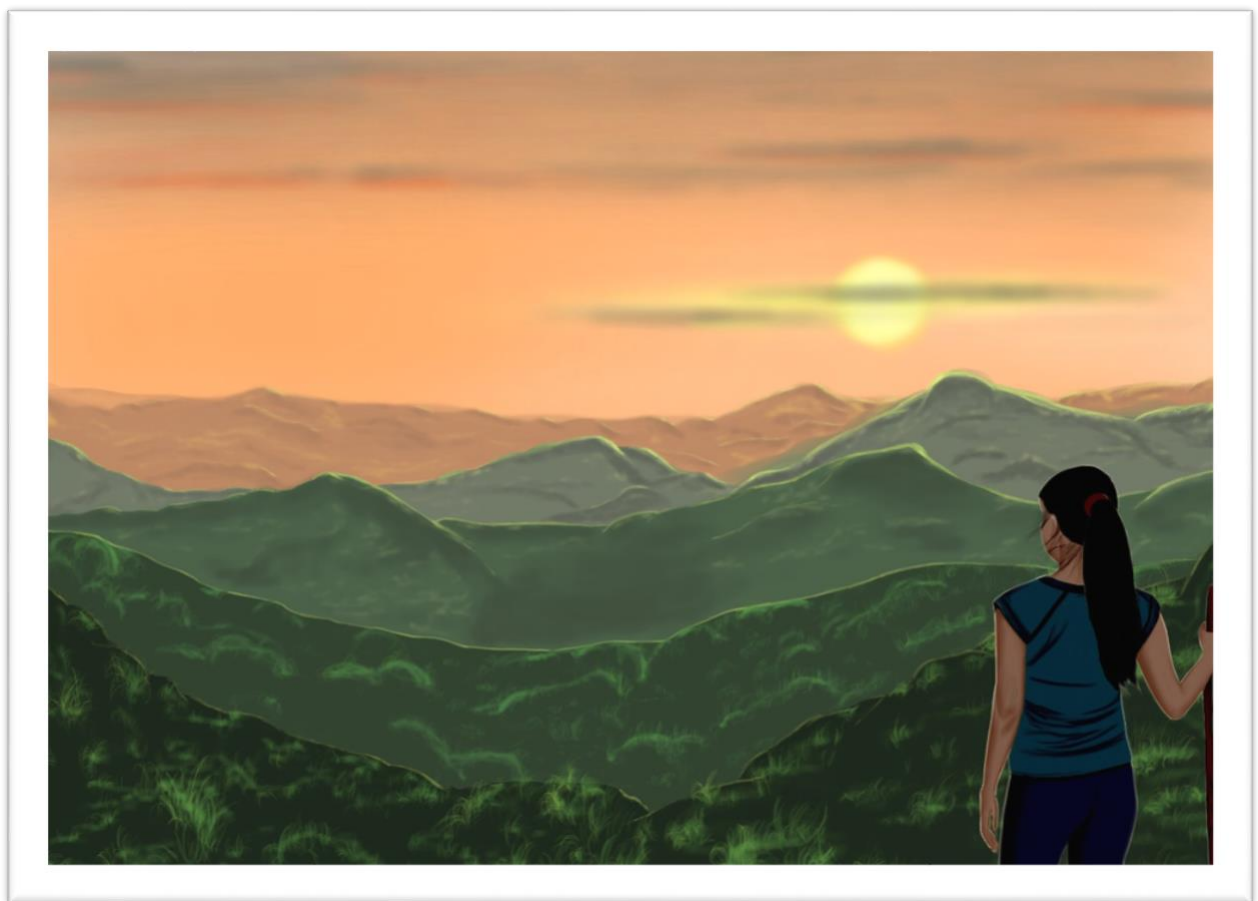
*Figure 2: Sheer Drop. Metaphors are models of things that can offer us different perspectives.
(Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)*

My own metaphors

The children’s board game, Snakes and Ladders, had long been my reliable metaphor for describing the process of studying with a disability or long-term health condition. It was an unthought metaphor though; one that I performed without awareness. Yet, each time I had a flare up or became ill, I ‘landed’ on a snake and slid back to square one. My peers, of course blissfully unaware of the game we were playing, forged ahead, leaving me no option but to race to catch up as soon as I was able. I never disclosed my health conditions. What was the point?

There was a syllabus to be covered whether I was ill or not. So, whenever I was able, I pushed myself to study. As is often the nature with chronic health conditions, additional stress such as that caused by unhelpful metaphors exacerbated the problem, triggering more flare ups and more ‘sliding back to square one’. The mental model I was using was patently inadequate, and yet it took the support of my mentor, funded through Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA), to point this out. She suggested that we look for a kinder narrative that might better support me, and the mountainous landscape based on a journey metaphor was born.

While the completion of the PhD was represented by the highest peak in the landscape, and reaching the summit was my overriding goal, there were other features along the way. Sometimes the going was easy, and the landscape gently undulated, allowing me to enjoy the journey, the sunshine, and the gentle breeze.



*Figure 3: Easy Going. Sometimes the going was easy, and I could enjoy beautiful views.
(Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)*

At other times, I was caught out, scaling a sheer rock face in the middle of a storm, or attempting to climb a mountain in an avalanche. The journey metaphor

offered a reliable way to “bypass sceptical left brain thinking processes to access the resources and change promoting capacities of the right brain” (Strong 1989:210). It reframed my problems, and by allowing me to take a step back from my immediate predicament, whether this was illness, bereavement, or simply overwhelming life administration, offered a lens through which I could reassess difficulties that had arisen and consider my response. In distancing myself from the whirlwind of life’s troubles, the metaphor allowed me the space and the time to realise that all was not lost or hopeless. Now, caught in a metaphorical storm, I was not sliding back to square one, but simply setting up my tent, lighting a fire, and waiting for the storm to pass. At any time, I could look back and see how far I had come, and how much work I had put into the PhD to get me this far. Pauses and interruptions were no longer the catastrophic occurrences that they had been, but simply facts of life. Moreover, the knowledge I had gained did not fall out of my head when I was forced to take a break, but in fact gave my subconscious time to work out some of the conundrums in my research.

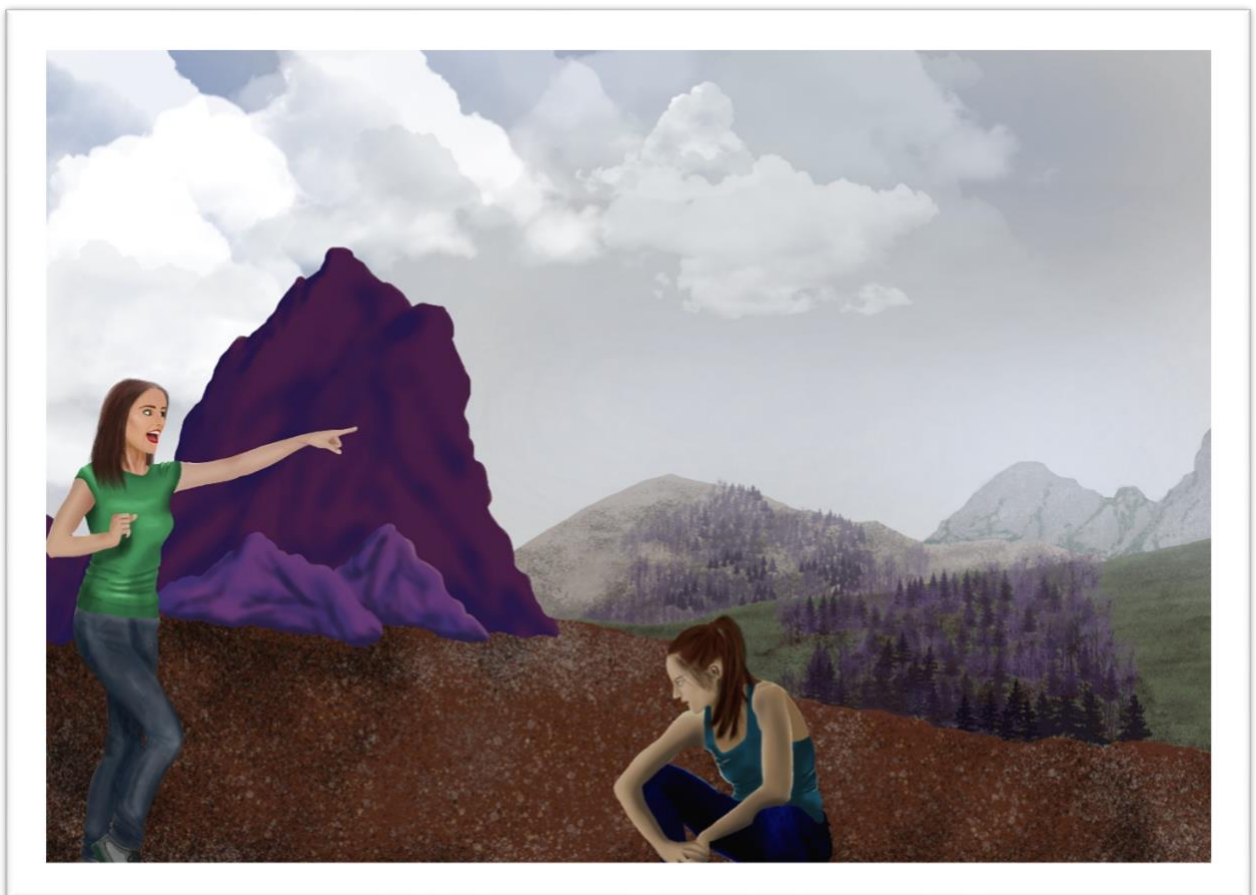


Figure 4: But Look How Far You've Come. A journey metaphor offered the perspective to enable me to look back, usually with a prompt, to appreciate the journey so far. A pause did not mean sliding back to square one, as it had with my previous working metaphor. (Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)

Indeed, the 'lightbulb' moments so crucial to completing the PhD often came during such pauses. In the later years of my PhD and having been ill for a while, I had fallen out of the habit of regular academic reading, and my brain refused to engage in the heavier, denser material that I needed to focus on. In an attempt to re-engage, I began reading around the subject, beginning with a couple of books that had been written for general audiences in response to the 2008 financial crash. Both books used the word I had come to focus on; embeddedness, without any definition or explanation. Both books claimed conflicting accounts of embeddedness and yet neither acknowledged the implications of their wording and arguments. This was it! Popular discourse, captured in these two generalist books, perfectly mirrored the debates about embeddedness that had troubled ESL literature for decades. A metaphorical lightbulb went on in my metaphorical cave, seemingly illuminating not only my current surroundings, but my path to the summit.

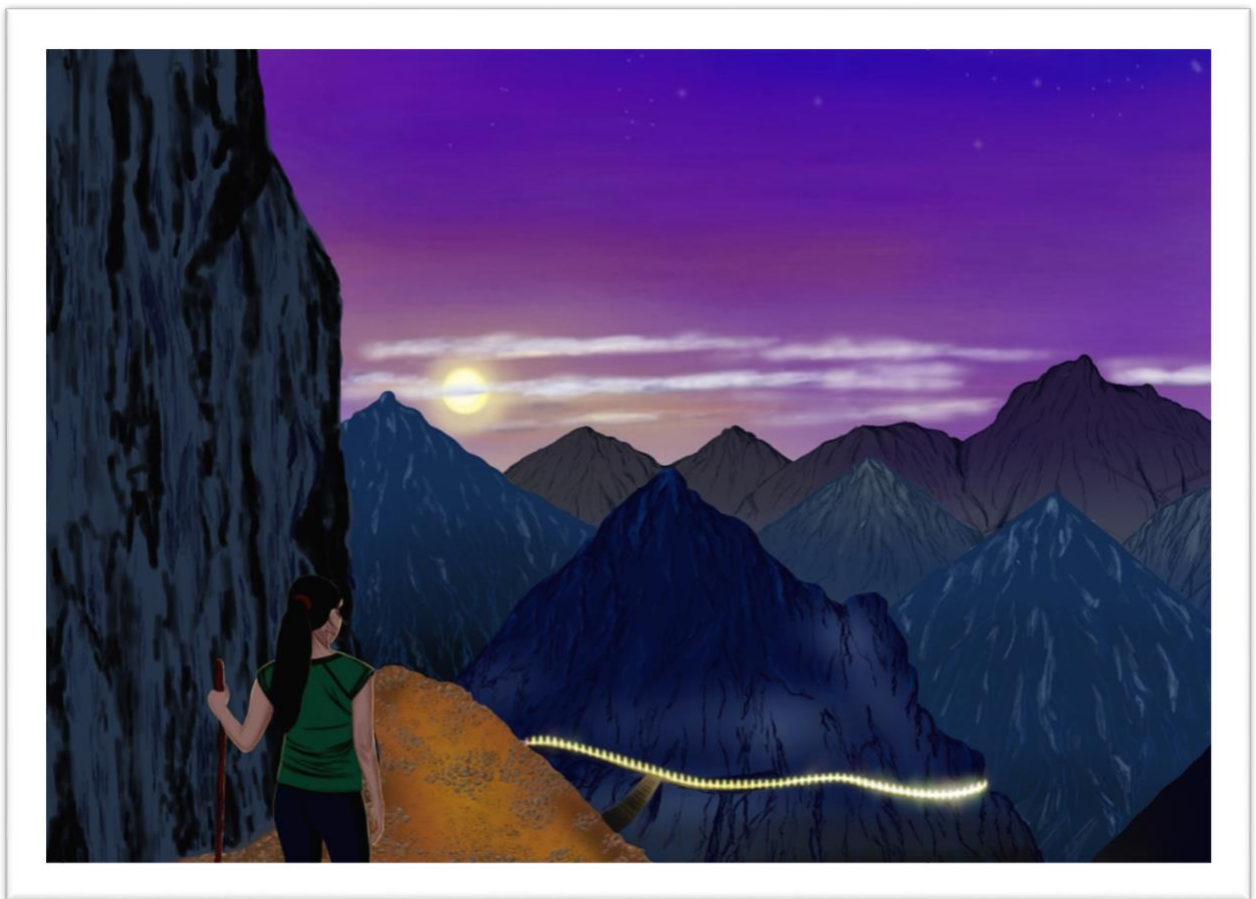


Figure 5: The Unknown Bridge. By pausing, and then revisiting my research, a metaphorical lightbulb went on in my metaphorical cave, illuminating my path to the summit. (Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)

[C] CREATING THE RESOURCE

From concept to resource

In the process of designing a postdoctoral research proposal, I reached out to Emily Allbon at City University, whose expertise in communicating legal concepts visually has driven the development of the fields of 'legal design' and visual teaching methods. Her sites, 'lawbore' and 'tldr.legal', are leading UK-based resources on the visualisation of legal concepts and analysis (Allbon 2002; Allbon 2021). We agreed that a visual piece about the *process* of doing a PhD might be a useful resource for other postgraduate research students. The obvious candidate here was a visualisation of the metaphors that I had found most helpful.

As with all 'good ideas', the original concept snowballed from a small, illustrated PhD journey to a fully interactive web-based game. Working with Howard Richardson who constructed the web interface and who manages the TLDR.legal site, I planned twelve paintings with accompanying narrative that would tell my story. Hotspots in the form of numbered signposts on a map would link to each of these paintings, with a voiceover reading the narrative aloud automatically when each painting was loaded. Background music was also added.



Figure 6: Creating a Map of my Journey. Each numbered signpost is a hotspot that, when clicked, takes the viewer to a different painting and narrative. (Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)

One of the first discussions I had with Howard was about voicing the narrative, as I was certain that this was something I could do myself. Fortunately for me, and for the quality of the final product, Howard kindly insisted that a professional with the requisite skills and equipment could achieve a better result. Despite my initial disappointment, I came to appreciate the value of collaboration and of relinquishing control: a departure from the usual solitary self-reliance that characterises PhD study in the social sciences and humanities. This approach was affirmed on hearing Tegan Harris's recordings of the narrative, which elevated the project, bringing the story to life with gravitas, authenticity, and professionalism. I was especially humbled when Tegan later emailed, via Howard, to say that working on the project had been 'inspiring and motivating', and had prompted her to explore options to start her own PhD (Richardson 2021).

The process of creating the resource was relatively straightforward, if laborious. I began sketching the paintings on my iPad with an Apple Pencil using

the digital art app ProCreate. My starting point was the background scenery, onto which I would add figures and other details that were sketched separately. The app allows a choice of hundreds of digital brushes as well as palettes and effects, allowing me to experiment with colour, tone, textures and so on. While there are some techniques that digital painting shares with its more traditional counterpart, in many respects it is quite a different endeavour. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the use of layers. These act as transparent sheets similar to layers of cling film over a traditional canvas. By splitting elements of each painting across many layers, each can be returned to, altered, multiplied, resized, distorted, or discarded individually meaning that each element of a painting can be reworked in numerous forms. This offers a non-destructive working style whereby the painting can be altered in myriad respects without any change or damage incurred to the original.

Initial responses to the resource before its official launch were positive, emphasising its value to the community. However, I soon realised the difficulties of asking PhD students to draw their own research journey maps. Accordingly, I developed a PowerPoint file of supplementary materials that could be downloaded from the website. This briefly explained the project, why we might visualise, and how metaphors can help us approach a research journey, and then included a blank map along with some elements; mountains, water, and a forest. As images with a transparent background, these elements can be duplicated and moved around by anyone wishing to build their own research journey map.

Using the resource

The Mountains of Metaphor is offered both as an autoethnographic account of my PhD journey, and also as a procedural tool for research students to navigate what can be a lonely yet highly pressurized environment in a context of shrinking support and funded resources. The value of metaphor as a tool for reframing experiences has long been recognized in psychology and psychotherapy, particularly with regard to the Gestalt tradition. Metaphors can offer “new perspectives” that identify areas of difficulty whilst also suggesting possibilities for change (Ferrari 2020). As an “indirect form of expression”, metaphors offer “windows into people’s phenomenological worlds” that allow for problem and solution reframing in a manner that avoids confrontation (Brooks 1985, cited in Strong 1989:203). Finally, metaphors can offer us some distance from our most powerful affective experiences, deflecting “the threatening directness of two-way

communication” and providing a forum, in this case visual, for “recalibrating” the research as well as our research practices (Strong 1989:205, 208).

The ‘journey’ metaphor is undoubtedly common, but is amenable to expansion and flexibility of application, offering broad applicability. So, for example, a student may wish to “draw” their own map of their PhD journey, plotting their start and end points, and drawing their journey trajectory with certain landscape features or obstacles along the way. They may then indicate on their map where they think they are, before asking their supervisor to also mark where they believe them to be. If both student and supervisor mark similar points on the map, this indicates that both have a similar sense of the student’s progress. A difference in understandings of progress might indicate the need to explore the metaphor further. While this might be an unpleasant discussion for both student and supervisor, this exercise is both valuable and, being less direct through the use of metaphor, potentially kinder and less confrontational.

Promotion and Feedback

To promote the resource once it was live, I tweeted links to the site along with some of the paintings and time-lapse videos of their creation, receiving 35 retweets from my personal account and 54 likes. Some tweets were retweeted multiple times with many more additional likes. Engagement was overwhelmingly positive, with comments that the resource was ‘beautifully written’ and offered a different ‘perspective’ on what progress looks like, notably giving permission to ‘pause’ and not see this as ‘lost’ time or ‘being stuck’ (Patton 2021; Adkins 2021). Additionally, it encouraged researchers to reappraise their own working metaphors and the environment these create for colleagues and peers (Munro 2021). I also wrote blog posts about the resource for various professional bodies and learned societies, and shared a link to the website on forums for PhD students (Williams 2021b; Williams 2021c; Williams 2021d; Williams 2021e; Williams 2021f). Returning again to social media, I approached the ‘mods’ of Reddit’s r/PhD forum to ask permission to promote the resource.⁵ My post, entitled ‘Being kinder to ourselves’, received 176 upvotes and one community ‘wholesome’ award (Williams 2021d).⁶ Other Redditors

⁵ ‘Mods’, or moderators, are the gatekeepers to a forum, monitoring the content and tone of ongoing discussions. As there is a ban on self-promotion in the r/PhD forum, it was advisable to request permission before posting. I received immediate permission.

⁶ A wholesome award is a free community award that anyone can gift to another “Redditor” (Reddit user) to thank them for sharing content that is both original and “wholesome”, or uplifting. There is no monetary value.

noted that the resource had ‘opened [their] eyes’ to aspects of their own journey. The resource was a ‘cool idea’, and I was thanked for sharing it. Two pieces of constructive criticism noted that more map elements in the supplementary materials would be useful, and that the resource might benefit from a gallery view to allow visitors to view the images without the text overlay. These have now been implemented.

[D] APPROACHING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY SENSITIVELY

The creation of the ‘Mountains of Metaphor’ resource required deep and personal reflection about my own PhD journey, as well as an acute awareness of my positionality during the creation of the resource. Autoethnography, as ‘both process and product’, is ‘hyper’ or ‘ultra-reflexive’ in the creation of a ‘self-narrative’ that places the self within a specific social context (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2014:2; Campbell 2016:96). It entails the ‘critical study’ of oneself ‘in relation to one or more cultural context(s)’, offering ‘nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships’ that focuses on ‘human intentions, motivations, emotions, and actions’ (Reed-Danahay 1997:9; Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2014:21).

While autoethnography suffers from a perceived lack of rigour when compared to other methodological approaches in the social sciences, this rather misses the point. The personal nature of an autoethnographic account requires the subjective, the non-scientific, and the partial to be placed centre stage. While qualitative methods that abstract and extract the researcher onto the objective (and therefore more acceptable) side-lines can offer one form of knowledge, Campbell argues that ‘[w]e need stories of lived experience in order to amass multi-layered knowledge of a phenomenon, understand its truths and meanings and its place in the culture’ (Campbell 2016: 98). There is arguably, then, a need for autoethnographic accounts of student experiences in the law school, in particular those with long-term health conditions or disabilities and those studying part time. The completion of a PhD in law is not simply the act of carrying out and writing up a piece of legal research, but of learning how to be researcher, and how to be a sensitive, reflexive, and responsible member of an active research community. However, as maps of old used to warn: ‘here be dragons’, and as Adams notes, the necessarily personal nature of any autoethnographic account entails risks associated with revealing information about oneself (Adams, Holman Jones, and

Ellis 2014:6–7). Early on the process of painting my metaphorical PhD journey, I was confronted with the realisation that any such resource would involve some form of ‘coming out’; as disabled, as a slower worker than most of my peers, as something ‘other to’ or ‘less than’ the professional image I had carefully crafted over the course of my PhD. This was more than imposter syndrome, and constituted a deep and gnawing fear that by sharing an honest version of my journey, I could potentially undermine my future career prospects.

To address this problem, I decided to extrapolate a narrative from my experiences while toning down some of the traumas that might be too personal to share. After all, the resource aims to share a metaphor and encourage others, not to traumatize the audience, and I wanted the journey to be widely relatable. Upheavals that interrupt or derail research projects come in all shapes and sizes, but all have the same effect. I felt that this justified a deviation from the strict honesty demanded by autoethnography, and chose to blunt some of the sharpest traumas to broaden the metaphors’ applicability. For example, while I may have used a storm to indicate bereavement, for another researcher, a storm might reflect a different personal trauma or upheaval that has an impact on their research.



Figure 2: Never Alone. During my journey, I realised that I was never alone, and that I simply needed to reach out for support. (Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)

The institutional context in which I completed my PhD constituted another factor for developing the Mountains of Metaphor, as it ‘pays forward’ the enabling support I received. In addition to having supervisors who consistently went above and beyond in supporting and believing in me, I was able to access Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) that offered mentoring for students with disabilities. DSA is a non-means tested, non-repayable payment to help with the ‘essential, additional expenditure a disabled student incurs while studying, because of their disability’ (Johnson et al. 2019). Over the years, budgetary cuts and devolved responsibilities to HEIs to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ under the Equality Act 2010 has meant shrinking levels of support for disabled students in reality. A report from the Department for Education in 2019 estimated that 60 percent of eligible students were unaware of DSA-enabled support that they could access, with the application process proving both problematically complex and exclusionary (Rose 2019).

In 2011 when I started my PhD, mentoring was available to students with physical disabilities, providing weekly sessions with a trained individual to focus on devising suitable work patterns and approaches. While disabled students are usually experts in their conditions, they may not be experts in the work and study practices that allow them to optimise their talents (Aguirre and Duncan 2013). By spending time with a professional to devise physical, mental, and emotional ‘work arounds’, disabled students can be guided to devise approaches that compensate for their impairments and limitations, and this additional support can be life changing.

Mentoring allowed me to appreciate that I did not need to run at full tilt to ‘keep up’ with my peers, nor see ‘progress’ in terms of health-wrecking schedules. It provided a space where I could learn to appreciate and respect my own limitations while learning how to be kinder to myself at times when I had lost sight of both my mountain summit as well as the reason that I was on that mountain in the first place. Nevertheless, were I to apply for DSA-funded mentoring now, I would no longer qualify for the support that enabled me to succeed. The Mountains of Metaphor resource responds to the current environment in which research students with disabilities are increasingly being left to ‘sink or swim’, offering supervisors a tool for support that might help students with long-term health conditions succeed.



Figure 3: The View from the Summit. The Mountains of Metaphor is one way of responding to reduction in support for students with disabilities. (Copyright 2021 Clare Williams; reproduced here with kind permission of tldr.legal)

[F] CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This piece has introduced the Mountains of Metaphor interactive web-based game as an autoethnographically-inspired account of a PhD journey in law as a disabled, part-time researcher. Citing theories of metaphor and the importance of framing, both of research and of research *processes*, this piece has highlighted the central role of appropriate and supportive metaphors. Then, citing legal design as the latest movement to recognise the importance of making law visible and tangible, the Mountains of Metaphor applies this to the way we approach a legal research project, suggesting a meta-understanding of how and why we might approach our research practices with kindness and self-compassion. Finally, by drawing attention to the ways in which we do, talk, and think about our approaches to research, this piece hopes to contribute to ongoing discourse within the law school about how early career researchers – especially those with long-term health

conditions or disabilities – can best be supported to become active and confident members of the research community.

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