

Going in Circles: Transitions, Connections, and Identity-Building through Venn Diagrams

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Abstract

Through a doctoral experience that altered my personal and professional identities, I developed an unexpected fondness for Venn diagrams. They meaningfully transformed my ideation, self-reflection, and research processes. More than logical figures, Venn diagrams are inspiring, embracing, and empathetic zones that offer room to grow and space to think, and where commonalities and differences can be celebrated. This paper is an homage to the inspirational circular shapes of the Venn diagram; not only have they transformed me, but they can ignite ideation, nurture connections, and foster growth for all teachers, students, and scholars out there.

Introduction

When starting my doctoral studies at age 40, I could not have imagined how much this transition would transform me. Beyond the impact the experience has had on my personal and professional identities, it has instilled in me an unexpected fondness for Venn diagrams.

While I remember learning about Venn diagrams in elementary school, they did not make a great impression on me; while they made sense, I never used them in any meaningful way. How did my graduate school journey lead me to becoming a Venn diagram aficionado? How have my transitions from teacher to student, then from doctoral candidate to doctor, been shaped by intersecting circles usually reserved for mathematical and logic problems? Those are questions I never thought I'd ask, but well, here we are.

From the beginning of my doctoral studies in 2018, I found myself drawn to the Venn diagram, and I have been consistently using it since. Could my newfound passion have been fueled by its increased presence in the public consciousness through viral memes and parodies in recent years? While it is difficult to prove, this possibility cannot be excluded, considering that I began my doctoral studies in August 2018, the same month the famous "Put your hands up" Venn diagram meme went viral (Know Your Meme, 2023). Regardless of how they penetrated my mind, Venn diagrams and their rounded intercepting shapes became a reassuring template for wandering thoughts, a framework for making points. I found myself drawing them instinctively, stretching and moving them around to make sense of messy thoughts or undisciplined arguments. At first, I was making lists draped in surrounding circles, like a net flung around a flock of birds. With time, their impact on my ideation process changed.

The Power of the Circle

The circles—or boxes, or ill-shaped blobs deformed by excessive text and lack of symmetry—have had a reassuring quality I cannot deny. They gave me confidence that messes would get sorted out. They freed me from rigid dichotomies and opened a path towards intersectionality. Placing ideas in virtual bins on the page helped make sense of the chaos I was trying to write or think about. Eventually, Venn diagrams became part of my scholastic identity; their evolution echoes the transitions I have been through in the last few years. I used them in most of my papers in the doctoral program, my dissertation and doctoral defense, as well as nearly every work I have since published. In short, I found myself *going in circles*.

Venn diagrams, and their attractiveness discovered and nurtured through my studies, are the perfect vehicle to *illustrate* the transitions I have been through since starting my doctoral journey six years ago, and will guide me through the ones to come.

The circle is an incredibly powerful shape. It embraces, flexible and elastic. There is always room for more. It is not a box, rigid and sharp; it is a hug, welcoming and forgiving. Circles are connections, communities. Aren't circles symbols of openness? In Korea, where I live and teach, circles are used to say "yes" (while Xs are used for no). Ripples, too: circles that expand, echo, and generate change. Circles can be affirmative *and* affirming.

From Organizing Ideas to Attracting Them

In my first attempts at Venn diagram making, guided by nearly forgotten remembrances from grade school math, I tried to visually express thoughts that were already on my mind. I aimed to sort them out, organize them in a logical and visually coherent way: *Thoughts, then diagrams*. With time, my conceptualization shifted and so did my habits; I started to draw Venn diagrams as templates to be filled, hoping to *attract* and generate ideas: *Diagrams, then thoughts*.

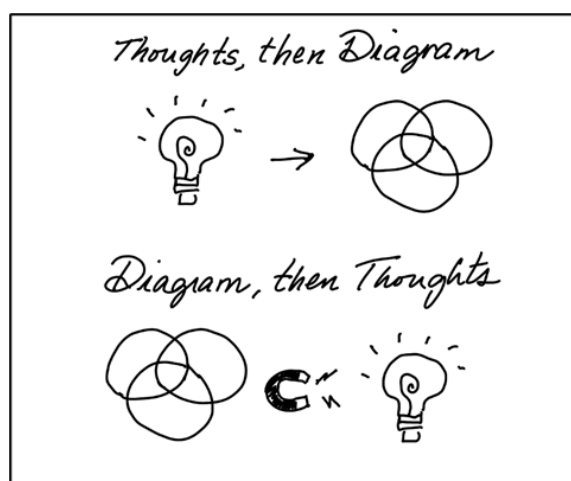


Fig. 1: Thoughts and diagrams

This shift from a desire to illustrate already formed thoughts to the usage of a visual template that attracts thoughts was significant. The Venn diagrams were no longer the result of my ideation process, but rather their ignition point.

The power of the converging space cannot be denied. Convergence sometimes feels like a buzzword with not much meaning. I prefer to think of Venn diagrams as “come together” figures, where space is *created* to allow possibilities. To make room for growth. A Venn diagram intersection creates a luxuriant zone, like ecotones in nature; after all, there is often more life and greater density in an ecotone than in the zones that constitute it (Kark, 2024).

One of the important aspects of the Venn diagram is the space it leaves for possibilities, allowing intersections to remain empty while acknowledging their potential. That is what distinguishes Venn’s diagram from Euler’s, as it offers *propositions* rather than solely reflecting realities (Edwards, 2004).

Transitions and Converging Identities

Schlossberg (2011) reminds us that “everyone experiences transitions, whether they are events or non-events, anticipated or unanticipated. These transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (p. 159). Going back to school in my 40s was a consequential transition, and it impacted my role, relationships, routine, and, perhaps most importantly, my identity.

While theorizing adult transitions, Schlossberg et al. (1989) identified three stages of transition, namely “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out.” With those in mind, I reflected upon the various shapes my transition took, from the moment I enrolled in the doctoral program to today. More clearly than ever, I could see it morphing into overlapping circular shapes.

Since a transition is usually marked by the passing of time, a timeline or other chronology-based visual representation might seem more suitable to depict it. In my case, my multiple identities did not succeed one another but, rather, merged and converged into a new one (see Figure 2).

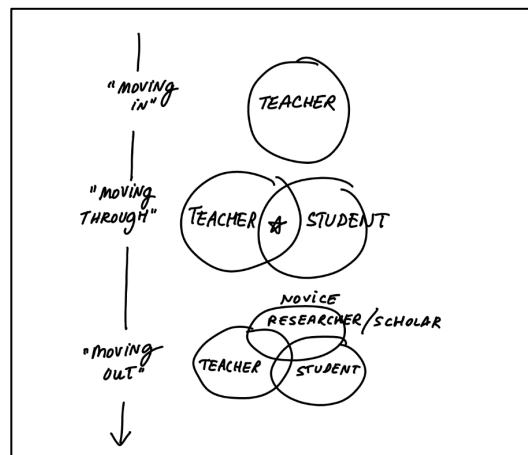


Fig. 2: Transition through graduate school

The natural tendency to describe a transition as a line snuck into my doodling, with an arrow showing the growth and expansion of Venn diagrams. The evolution from one diagram to the next marks a change, a growth in the multiplication of the potential zones of convergence, or propositions (Edwards, 2004).

My enrollment in a doctoral program did not pause nor end my teaching career but, rather, marked the opening of a parallel path for me to pursue simultaneously. While multiple roles and responsibilities came with an increased workload and mental burden, they opened up a new converging zone where my new identity could develop and take root.

Juggling multiple personal and professional duties led to stress and a toll on my health, as is often the case for doctoral students (Gonzalez et al., 2021). While deadlines multiplied and workloads grew, the number of hours in a day did not. Thanks to family members and friends' championing efforts, I received strong support that made a positive difference (Schlossberg, 2011) and softened the blow of a demanding transition.

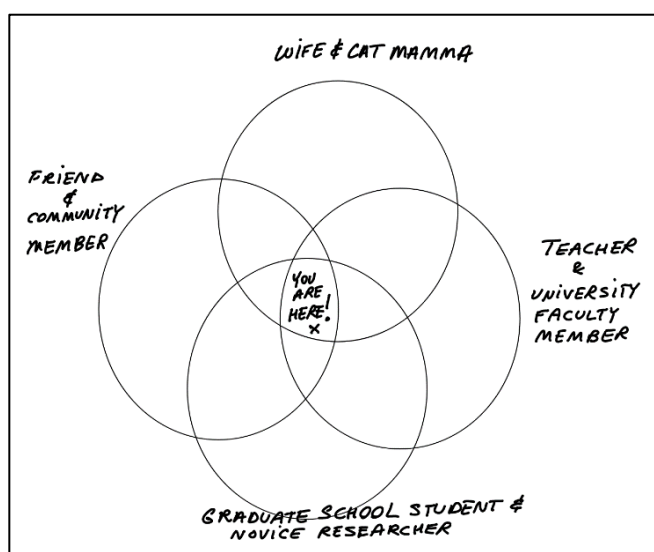


Fig. 3: “Multifaceted identity”: so many roles, so little time

Being a Teacher, Being a Student

I have been teaching for a long time. My return to school, to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership, ended a 10-year scholarly enrollment gap. The transition from teacher to student—or rather from teacher only to teacher *and* student—was significant and gave me new insight into my profession (see Figure 4). It shifted my perspective and gave me a fresh outlook on education, from a didactical *and* relational stance. Being at the receiving end of instruction felt as reassuring as confusing; eager to learn and be guided, I was also fighting “teacher’s instincts” pushing me to take the lead.

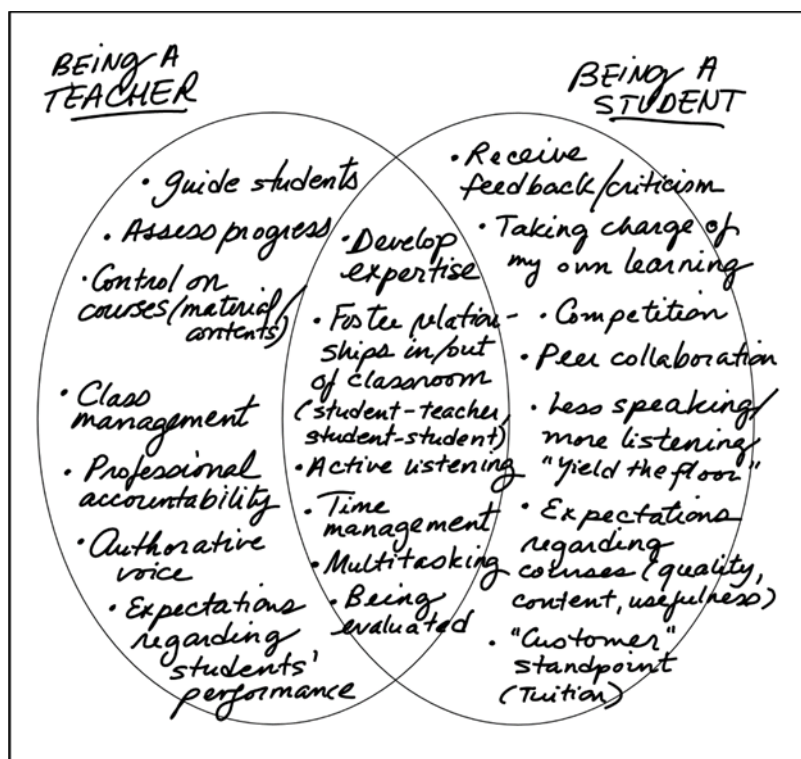


Fig. 4: "Moving through": being a teacher and being a student

My two roles—my two *identities*—converged to create a hybrid identity that incorporated existing elements from both, yet felt new. Rather than old thoughts, needs, and realities being replaced or erased, they were complemented.

My journey of exploration and meaning-making related to my identity and transition cannot be detached from my role as an educator. My transition from teacher to student, then from doctoral candidate to doctor, has always remained connected to my relationship with my students and my role as an educator. I feel that studying and learning, (re)becoming a student, made me a better teacher. Like ripples on water, my process of learning and discovering new aspects of my professional and personal self impacted my teaching and, naturally, my students (see Figure 5). As time passed, the impact of students, and my relationships with them, had an impact on my scholarship, creating a cyclic sense of give-and-take that propelled me.

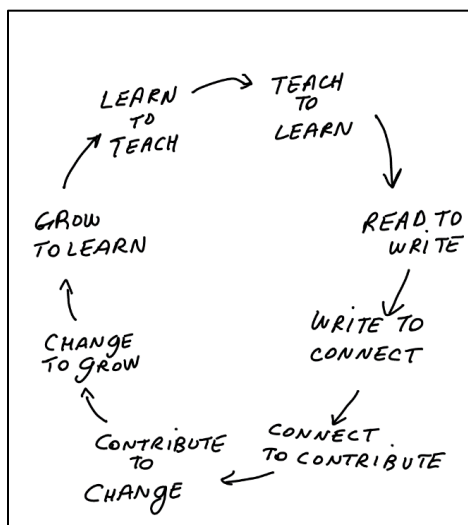


Fig. 5: Cyclic give-and-take (being a student and being a teacher)

Empathetic Figures to Illustrate Relationships

It is often said that human relationships and connections are rooted in commonalities. Venn diagrams can be powerful tools to illustrate how people connect through similarities while embracing differences. They can be a tool for connection building, as they offer space where people can be both similar and different, where they can share attributes while remaining distinctive. In that sense, Venn diagrams are empathetic figures.

Becoming a student again as a middle-aged woman offered me new insights into my profession and, more importantly, into my students. It made me realize what I have in common with them, and it made me question and re-examine my assumptions regarding my role and theirs (see Figure 6).

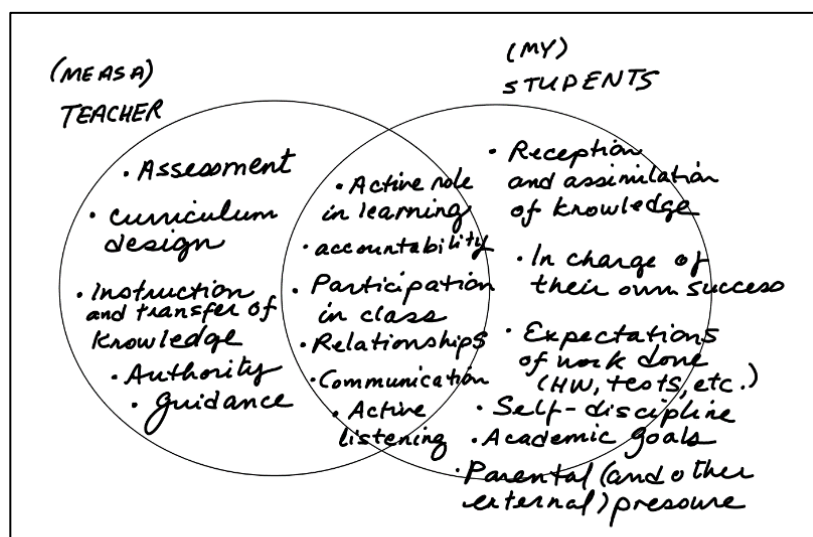


Fig. 6: Connections and relationships between my students and me

Beyond the window Venn diagrams offered me into personal identity and transition, they gave me a chance to examine how my relationships and connections are developed and maintained. I explored my existing relationships with university students I teach and advise, and then I turned to the new personal connections that were born in the transitional space of my doctoral studies: with my classmates, and with my professors and advisor (see Figure 7).

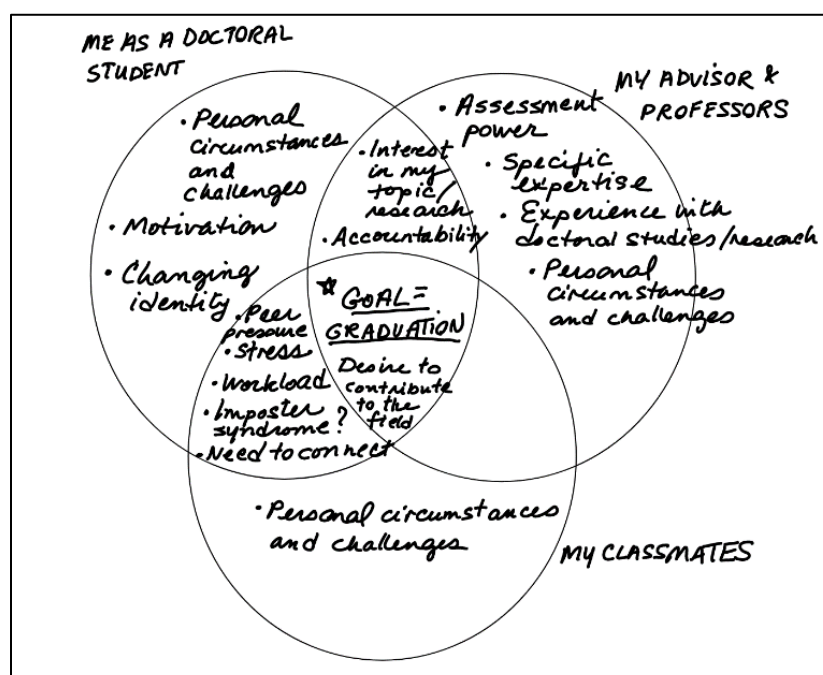


Fig. 7: Relationships in the doctoral program

The relationships I developed with professors, and especially with my advisor, were pivotal in my transitional experience. Relying on my professors' experience and expertise was beneficial and reassuring, but I also felt a tension that Gardner (2008) described as a "constant need for support and guidance from faculty ... often tempered by the need to feel competent and independent from them as well" (p. 344). I had to perform and often figure things out on my own, as the development of expertise and self-reliance was expected, yet I was expected to abide by strict guidelines that left little room for independence or creativity.

While the intersection between my classmates and my professors remains empty, it does not mean that no relationship exists; to the contrary, the diagram allows for room, ideas, *propositions*. While I cannot extrapolate on the commonality of their relationship, I can and should acknowledge the crossroads they share. Here lies the power of the Venn diagram in illustrating relationships: it leaves space for growth and change, for different perspectives, for *possibilities*. *Empathy* can be defined as the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings (Cambridge, n.d.)—the key word being "share." Venn diagrams offer a shared space, where commonalities are celebrated without sacrificing distinctiveness.

The Struggles of the Post-Doctoral Transition

Once my doctoral dissertation was defended, I entered a new phase of my life. This stage of the transition, *moving out*, came with unexpected challenges. Transitioning from doctoral candidate to doctor turned out to be difficult, filled with uncertainty, confusion, and guilt. The development of my disciplinary identity (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008), which began with enrollment and continued through my studies and beyond, was more challenging and complicated than expected. To battle helplessness and confusion, I turned to Venn diagrams' reassuring round embrace (see Figure 9). While some people journal to let their thoughts and inner torment pour onto the page, I draw circles and let them catch my wandering thoughts, like fishing nets would swimming fish.

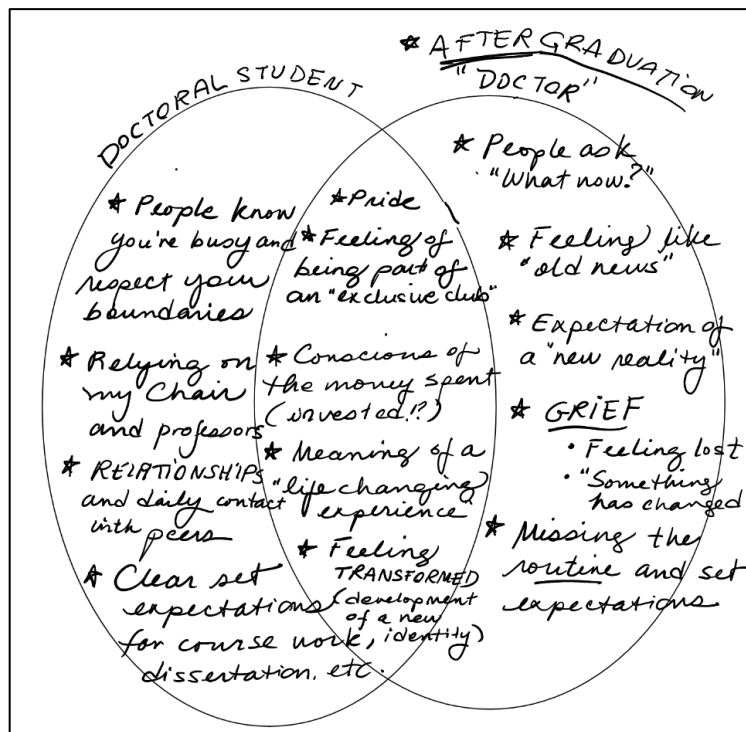


Fig. 9: Being a doctoral student and becoming a doctor

The creation of the converging zone felt reassuring to me, as if some things were changing yet certain key elements remained; a crossroads where things evolve but do not disappear.

Once they reach the end of the doctoral journey, many students struggle with insecurity regarding their future, and the support they receive from their institution or faculty is uneven and often insufficient (Moreau et al., 2022). My transition out of the doctoral program, which I sometimes refer to as “post-doctoral blues,” led me to question almost every aspect of my being, my work, and my life. The transition was neither smooth nor chaotic; rather, it felt like a no man’s land where my sense of direction was momentarily lost. As Anderson et al. (2011) remind us, “Transitions require coping. Moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self; letting go of former roles and learning new ones” (p. 40). Filling up this “in-between” with thoughts gave me back a sense of control, suggesting not all

was lost after all, and that there were some tangible things to hold on to. The intermediate zone of a Venn diagram is not pure addition nor subtraction, it is expansion: it creates more room, a new space where things from the past remain true but open up to new possibilities for the future.

Transition into Academic Work: Powerful Tools for Qualitative Research

While set diagrams, such as Venn's, are often used for mathematics and quantitative inquiries, they can be powerful tools for visual representation and clarity of findings in qualitative research (Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015).

Another transition I underwent was from teacher/student to scholar-practitioner, academic writer, and researcher. Beyond the comfort they gave me through journaling and personal ideation efforts, Venn diagrams became useful tools in my arsenal in terms of data analysis and representation of findings. Naturally, they also guided me through my ideation process, often offering insight that helped me craft research questions or statements of purpose (see Figure 10).

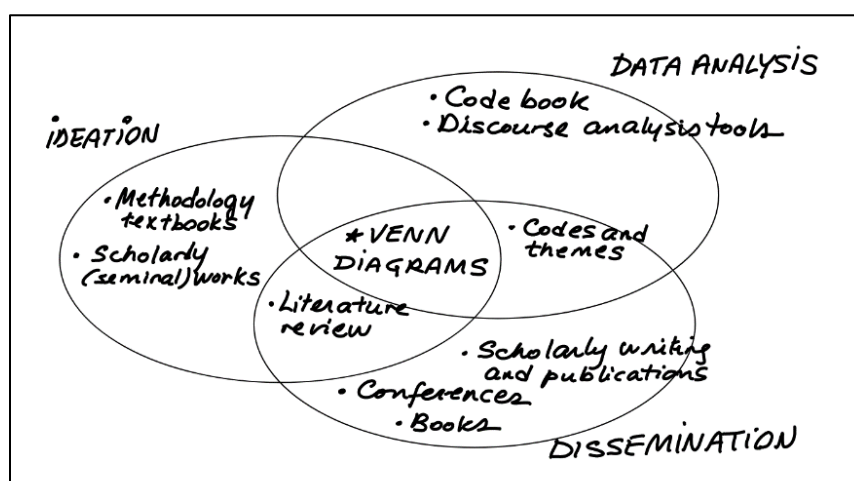


Fig. 10: Tools used in research endeavors

While the Venn diagram is often used to illustrate findings (Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015), I have come to use it in almost all steps of my research process. The development of a visually driven research mind is not something I had expected, but it became part of my identity as a scholar as I transitioned from doctoral candidate to doctor, from student to scholar-practitioner. Considering that Venn diagram strategies can be effective in improving students' academic performance (Syafii & Miftah, 2021), their utility for research procedures for novice scholars is evident. In my case, developing Venn diagrams has given me a sense of empowerment, and helped me find and develop my scholastic agency and identity.

Targets Are Circles, Too

Targets are also circles. Goals are circular, ready to welcome a brave arrow or a powerful punch. Venn diagrams are welcoming zones for me, as there is acceptance in the space left for ideas to come, movement, and change. Transitioning from doctoral candidate to scholar-practitioner also meant finding my place in my field, and forging my own disciplinary identity (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008) based on research interests, relevant experience, and professional expertise. Looking for a way to narrow my focus and find a converging point where my expertise, past research experiences, and current scholastic hunger would meet, I designed a Venn diagram (see Figure 11) that feels like an invitation. I smile when I look at the circle of “interests,” as it runs wild and free, without fear or judgment. Having room for all possibilities gives me freedom of thought because there is *room for all potentials* even if they never materialize. They are welcome nonetheless, as open propositions.

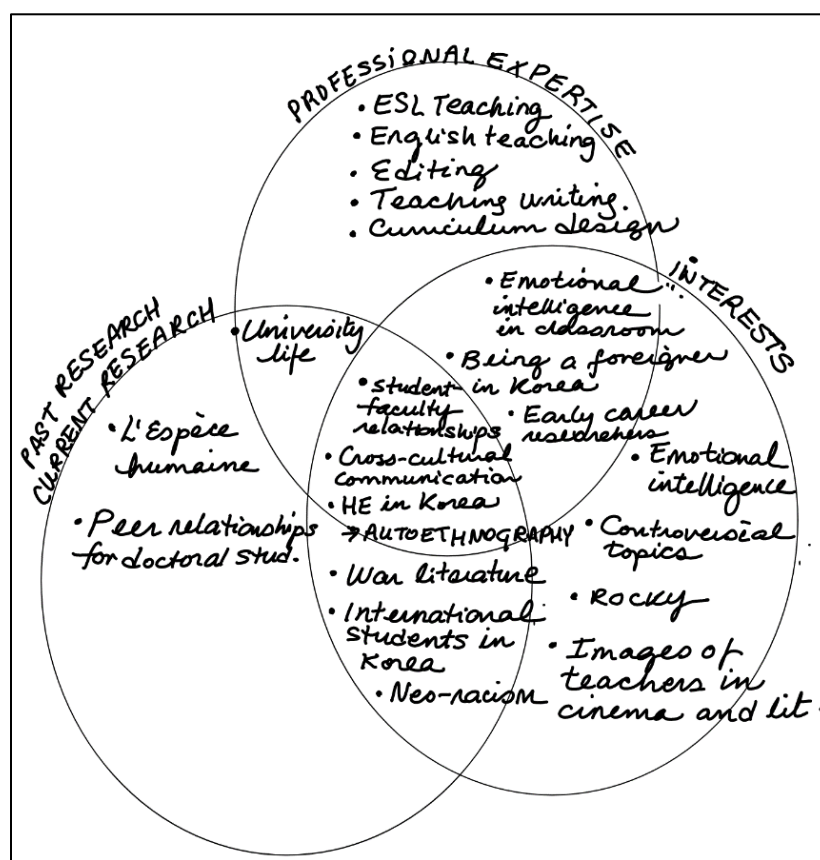


Fig. 11: “Moving on”: where do I belong in the academic world?

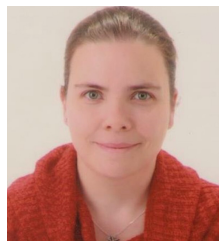
Concluding Thoughts

Speed comes through circular motions, too. The world goes round and round. There is no progress without motion. Transitions are all about moving. Evolving and changing. Growing and failing. Moving forward. While we are all striving for creativity, I am hoping to transition from *thinking outside the box* to *thinking inside circles*. We often say that going in circles means repeating oneself, wasting time, stagnating. For me, circles have become the opposite. Circular Venn diagrams are symbols of growth and ideation, vessels that welcome thoughts and, more importantly, foster ideation, empathy, and connections.

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