

Doctoral Education, Pedagogy, and Autoethnography

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Introduction

This special issue of the *Morning Watch* brings together papers written for a doctoral course in the Faculty of Education. As facilitators of ED 702A/B Advanced Research Methodology in Education, a core course in the Faculty of Education's doctoral program, we welcome you to this Special Edition of the *Morning Watch*. The course description for ED 702 is as follows:

This advanced research course begins with the central idea that what inspires us and excites our imaginations is at once autobiographical and deeply embedded in our creations; that, as a community of scholars, we will be creating new knowledge through our research; and that as researchers we will need to contend with methodological concerns including ethics, positionality, values, voice and our own authority as interpreters. The course is intended to promote thinking about what research is or can be, what possibilities and limitations exist, what conditions make it possible to participate in research, and what commitments must be addressed in making decisions about epistemology and method. The principal focus will be on developing models of disciplined inquiry aimed at the advancement of educational ideas and practice.

ED 702 is delivered over the Fall and Winter semesters, and students are required to submit a number of assignments to meet the goals of the course. The papers collected here were written in response to the first assignment. We asked students to write an autoethnography on a topic of their choice and to explore the tenets of the methodology. We also indicated, that if they wished, we could produce this special edition of the *Morning Watch* to publish their work. We formed an editorial team consisting of Haley Toll and Robert Pozeg (students), and Drs. Cecile Badenhorst and Beverly FitzPatrick (facilitators), although Haley and Robert carried the weight of the production. We instituted a process to provide students the experience of being reviewed within a supportive framework. We asked colleagues within the faculty and other disciplines to participate in a blind review process and we worked with students to make the most of the feedback. The editorial team is particularly grateful to the reviewers for adding to their already overburdened workloads and taking on this task. The reviews overall were compassionate and kind but also demanding, and the writers experienced a taste of what it is like to rework a paper iteratively until it is accepted for publication.

Not all students in this group were familiar with autoethnography before they started the course. For some, this was their first exposure to this methodology. In addition, not all students felt aligned with this

way of doing research and, for some, it was an uncomfortable fit. Yet, they all undertook the task with dedication, and produced unique and fascinating papers.

Why Autoethnography?

Several colleagues have asked why *autoethnography* as the focus for a research methodology in the first assignment. Why not allow the students to choose their own research methodology? Would it not be fairer to students not working in qualitative fields to have a choice? In this paper, we would like to explain the rationale.

Since I, Cecile, generally teach mature adults in my classes on adult education and post-secondary teaching and learning, I take it for granted that the first assignment should always be personal and contain a narrative component. I learned this in my early days as an adult educator. As coordinator of an adult literacy non-governmental organisation in the poverty-ridden, semi-desert rural areas of South Africa, I learned that the way to engage adult learners was not to assign them work or tell them what “gurus” and other people who lived in faraway countries had to say about education. Also, the people I came into contact with had stringent standards, despite the prevailing poverty, and did not want to waste their time in activities that had no relevance to their immediate context. Instead, the connections to learning were forged through linkages to their lives. One didn’t just stand up in the (outdoor) classroom and spout theories and philosophies; instead, time was spent shaking hands and bowing heads and engaging in conversations: “Tell me about yourself?”, “About your family?” and “Why have you joined our class?” Of course, none of this was asked directly but unfolded in the slow getting to know one another. In turn, they would ask of me: “Who are you (really)?”, “Tell us about your family” and “Why are you teaching this class?” In these conversations, the adult learners would decide if, indeed, they wanted to take the class with me. Essentially what they were doing was starting a relationship, forging a connection, and building trust.

What I experienced in these adult learning contexts is echoed in the teaching literature. Adult pedagogy texts are full of the benefits of narrative learning (Clark, 2010; Hayler & Moriarty, 2017; Rossiter & Clark, 2007). Narratives about experience and meaning have long been recognized as a teaching and learning methodology particularly suited to adult learners, because narrative allows the learner to assume a position of *knower* who can draw on valid experiences and contribute to learning rather than being merely a *receiver of knowledge* (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Narrative learning draws on and acknowledges the many experiences of the adult learner. It also brings the audience right into the world of the author where we learn from the meaning-making s/he brings to the experience.

I, Bev, come from a background of teaching young children, whose lives consist of stories. Fox (1993) said, “let the story fight back”. Autoethnography provides researchers with the opportunity to traverse between art and science, forging links between the two, yet respecting the differences. My experiences with students from kindergarten to post-secondary remind me that students are their stories and that their learning begins there. Providing students with permission to examine themselves and to situate themselves in the beginning of their doctoral explorations through such an assignment strengthens the validity of their beings as PhD students.

What does Autoethnography do?

Moving into formal, four-walled classrooms, and more recently into virtual spaces, we need to realize how seldom we hear the stories of our students. We keep their “life struggles, their efforts to survive,

[...] their capacities to adapt, to learn, to change” (Karpiak, 2010, p. 13) firmly outside those classroom doors. Fixated on content and substantive issues, we rarely notice how lives, learning, and change sometimes collide and sometimes coexist.

Doctoral students are under enormous strain. Systemic pressures have created conditions of work intensification, time compression, career uncertainty, and job-prospect insecurity that have inevitably led to high levels of anxiety and stress among students (Burford, 2017). The pressures of having to succeed in these pressure-cooker circumstances can lead to emotional exhaustion, feelings of isolation, and disengagement. Essentially, we expect doctoral students to become (impossibly) perfect neoliberal subjects. Neoliberalism normalizes processes of disconnection from others and ourselves (Jones, 2015). Research indicates that there is a 50% attrition rate for doctoral students in the USA and Canada (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014; Hunter & Devine, 2016). Students leave for many reasons (lack of finances, mentorship problems, family relationships under pressure, etc.) but studies show that there is often no difference in academic performance between completers and non-completers (Di Pierro, 2012). The students who leave are as academically capable as those who stay. What are the push-factors then? Loneliness, disconnection, isolation, and emotional exhaustion are all cited as major problems for doctoral students (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). However, Emmiöglu, McAlpine, and Amundsen (2017) suggest there are two crucial types of experiences in the day-to-day activities of doctoral students that make them want to leave a program: 1) not feeling like an academic, and 2) feeling excluded from an academic community.

This is where autoethnography can play a pivotal role. For several reasons, autoethnography can help students feel like academics and help them connect to their academic communities. First, autoethnography encourages stories of diverse contextualised experience which is filled with contradictions, nuances, and complexities. Rather than white-washing experience into a normalised heterogeneous average, autoethnography not only recognises difference but exposes how experiences are constructed and reproduced socially. Second, autoethnography privileges deep reflexivity – a critical suspiciousness of our rooted assumptions. Through reflexivity, we come to know ourselves through an integration of inner and outer lives, and through recognising the emotional self in learning (Clark & Dirkx, 2008). Writing about the past, present, and shifting across time, we create identities, albeit mobile and fluid ones. Third, autoethnographies construct audiences who listen because we have to move out of our own cultural frames. We are unsettled and provoked by evocative language and form. We begin to realise that our lives do not exist within an “existential vacuum but within an intricate web of narrative environments” (Randall, 2010, p. 27). Finally, autoethnography helps us to develop relationships. Narrative has the potential to profoundly connect us, and to build deeper relationships - wider ones. These textualized lives open the space for continued dialogue and exchanges.

At the same time, no matter how personal the story, narratives are always also social in nature (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Autoethnography, then, requires the doctoral student to assume a scholarly gaze on their intimate memories, reminiscences, and nostalgias. As Hayler (2017) argues: “One of the fundamental elements of autoethnographic research is the recognition of how self-narrative is constructed, changed and developed in relation to grand, group and individual narratives” (p. 3). Essentially, students begin to learn that life stories are part fictions rather than whole expressions of individual experience and selfhood (Michelson, 2011). Jones (2015) suggests that “crafting narratives that bring the student into study encourages learners to unpack how knowledge is produced and to discover their own contributions to their learning” (p. 77). In this way, students learn the nature of academic knowledge and how to become academics.

Conclusion

What is highlighted in this introduction is that the autoethnographic assignment in this course played several roles: 1) enabling students to explore a new and exciting research methodology, 2) allowing students to examine themselves and to tell their stories, 3) creating connections through the nature and telling of the stories, and 4) exposing students to the nature of academic knowledge by juxtapositioning the personal with the social. Ultimately, we hope that the assignment and this special edition contributed towards their sense of belonging in academia. We also hope that we have achieved what the ED 702 course description urged us to do:

what inspires us and excites our imaginations is at once autobiographical and deeply embedded in our creations; that, as a community of scholars, we will be creating new knowledge through our research; and that as researchers we will need to contend with methodological concerns including ethics, positionality, values, voice and our own authority as interpreters.

Autoethnographers tell their personal stories through aesthetic and evocative techniques that induce or even provoke feelings in the readers or consumers. They are also bound to consider how others may have had similar, even if unique, experiences; they analyze how these experiences may illuminate “facets of cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 276). Researchers may conduct their analysis thorough comparing their personal stories with past and present research, interview pertinent others, or analyze relevant literature.

These autoethnographies give the students voice, not only their rich personal voices, but the academic voices of researchers who are willing to take risks to contribute to knowledge. Haley Toll uses her own artwork as an evocative exemplification of herself as a “contemporary female Jewish woman”. She uses relational autoethnographical research to analyze how her experiences as a Canadian Jewish woman and artist connect with and are informed by the artwork of Jewish people living in concentration camps during the Holocaust.

Robert Pozeg’s evocative autoethnography is penned through letters to his father, letters never written, to tell his story. It is meant to evoke, provoke, and unsettle. Robert has book-ended his evocative letters to his father with two letters to the reader, which are more analytical in style, and which set the stage and then close the curtain for his personal letters.

Patrick Wells, a marine biologist and high school science teacher, frames his autoethnography as primarily analytical. He examines his growth as a teacher and how he has changed as he began to embrace student inquiry as a method of teaching science. Chris Cumby’s autoethnography, too, is analytical in its core. Chris identifies as cisgender and describes how a workplace event was a “profound experience” that compelled him to write this “queer ethnography” as a way to examine “queer sensibilities within professional spaces”. Also analytical, Chinwe Ogolo writes a moderate autoethnography about her academic trek with writing. She describes her yo-yo journey with writing and she leaves us with a ditty from her childhood:

Good, better, best
I will never rest
Until my good is better, and my better, best.

Like Hayler (2017), we experience pedagogy through stories. It's how we come to know ourselves as teachers and one way we have come to know this group of doctoral students. We are inspired by the depth of engagement and deep reflection undertaken in these papers, and by the authors' willingness to reveal their vulnerabilities and show courage in their honesty about complex identity issues. It was a privilege to read the papers and to absorb the variety of styles and character, and to witness diverse lives of colour and shadow. A reminder, again, that listening, instead of always talking first, reaps untold rewards.

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