Toward an autoethnographic pedagogy

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Introduction

In the past year I have re-oriented my teaching on teacher training and learning support programmes towards autoethnography. I uncovered this idea whilst frustrated in assessing a third year undergraduate module on autobiography and learning by the fact that none of the assignments presented for assessment set their personal autobiographical narratives in their socio-cultural, political and economic contexts, in spite of encouragement from me, the teacher, to do so. Utilising autobiographical approaches in teaching, as in research, are now commonplace. Putting the self (back) into teaching and learning is often a difficult task at first because teachers and students in adult and higher education have been through a few years of socialisation into academic and scholarly ways of writing, including the use of the third person. This is well discussed by Crème and Lea (2008) who see that putting the ‘I’ back into academic writing is a way teachers and students can position themselves in relation to both the reader (and, most times) the assessor, and the autobiographical material they are working with. According to Sparkes (2000, pp.21), such personal narratives - referred to as autoethnographies - ‘are highly personalised accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding’. In which case, there is, in my view, learning taking place.

Autoethnography as situating learning

Having contributed to the use of autobiography and life history narratives as a method of qualitative research inquiry, it is now beginning to makes sense to me to reconnect research and pedagogy through an autoethnographical approach. The reconceptualisation of the notion of ‘research-led pedagogy’ away from being ‘research results informed’ to an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges the possibilities that this is in itself a research process, and not something separate from, or needing to be linked to, research as we tend to do in higher education. This realisation coincided with the ‘uncovering’ of autoethnography. Whereas I thought I had invented life history research¹, I was well aware that autoethnography had been around for sometime. Its first use is credited to Hayano (1979) nearly 20 years ago. But I had not really thought about its value for pedagogy until I came to rewrite the module on autobiography and learning to ensure that in future personal narratives would have to be located in context. Because we are required to ensure that our SCUTREA papers build on rather than repeat previous discussions at its conferences, I searched the British Education Index’s Education-line database (which includes several other educational conferences as well as SCUTREA; http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/), for previous papers on autoethnography To my surprise (and relief) I found only one paper – and that was a SCUTREA paper dating back to Warwick in 1999, given by the late and much-missed Valerie-Lee Chapman, entitled ‘A women’s life remembered: autoethnographic reflections of an adult/educator’. On reflection, I am neither surprised to find it was written by a woman nor specifically Valerie-Lee, because by their very nature, autoethnographies critically challenge taken for granted ways of knowing, ways of thinking, and ways of making sense of the world, which bring the subjective and the objective together. They situate our selves into their social and cultural
milieu. Chapman notes its varying meanings, from being an exercise in creative writing (citing Carolyn Ellis, whose edited collections published in 2002 - with Arthur Bochner - and 2004 have significantly influenced the development of the autoethnographic in my own pedagogy), to a new approach in social science, and Chapman’s own orientation derived from feminism:

Autoethnography has been inspired by feminist autobiography to risk writing about the everyday, about lives that once were not accounted as important enough for the researchers to bother with … (Chapman, 1999, pp.30)

For Chapman, autoethnography was a ‘political, dialectical and interactive strategy’ (pp.31). This approach is ‘embedded in intertextually socio-historical situations’ (pp.30). Drawing on Reed-Danahay (1997), Chapman defines autoethnography as ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self in a social context’. In doing autoethnography, we are situating our selves. In doing autoethnographies in the classroom or other sites of learning, teachers situate their selves in their own teaching and in their students’ learning; and students situate their learning in their selves and their teacher’s teaching.

**Autoethnography as pedagogy**

It is tempting to attribute my own realisation of the pedagogical significance of autoethnographies to coincidence. At last year’s AERC/CASAE conference in Halifax (Nova Scotia), and the SCUTREA conference in Belfast, I was tentatively presenting papers on the cultural significance of silence in pedagogy. Being encouraged through the conference discussions to continue to research the salience of silence for learning, I came across an article by Pennington (2007), entitled ‘Silence in the classrooms’. But it was its subtitle that captured my imagination: ‘autoethnography as pedagogy’. The article reported research into the use of autoethnography as a teaching method in supporting pre-service teachers in an elementary school setting in the United States, that sought to encourage trainee teachers to reflect on racism in teaching children of colour by focusing on whiteness and using critical race theory as the interpretive framework. Integral to this process, it was felt essential by Pennington, as the teacher, to narrate her story. The story is about her struggles as a white woman working with children of colour to engage with white racism. The pedagogical implications came through her realisation in the engagement in teaching that the teachers

were there to not only teach the children of colour we were ‘given’, but that we were saving them as we did it with very little examination of our own racial positioning. (Pennington, 2007, pp.94) *(Emphasis added)*

‘Saving’ has been emphasised because the telling of the story, the attempt to capture the feelings Pennington was experiencing in teaching about white racism in the narrative, realised a distinction between the teacher as ‘saviours’ and teachers as ‘conquerors’, forcing her to think deeply about her own pedagogy; what social workers as well as teachers used to consider the ‘care versus control debate’. Pennington was anxious to construct and validate not just her work as a teacher, but — indeed — her very identity as a teacher as a care-giver rather than a custodian. She reflects on the contradiction:

We were trying to save the children from their own culture by bringing them into ours, or ‘conquering them’ … Many times we tried to save them from their own families, sometimes with the child’s blessings and invitation, we ‘norm-referenced’ the children’s anecdotal notations of their family’s lives by our own. Our descriptions became sincere yet fictionalised accounts of our interpretation of events. (Pennington, 2007, pp.98).
In discussing the social construction of Whiteness, Mahoney (1997) pointed out that white women can have ‘pre-scripted roles’ in working with cultures of colour, and their action was saying more about white women’s preconceived ideas in how to relate to communities of colour:

White women see ourselves as acting as individuals rather than members of a culture in part because we do not see much of the dominant culture at all. Our own lives are therefore part of a racialised world in ways we do not see. (Mahoney, 1997, pp.308)

Pennington offers a second conceptualisation of the relationship between autoethnography and pedagogy, which she refers to as ‘breaking the fourth wall’. This ‘denotes when the plot of a story calls for an event to shatter the barrier between the fictional world of the story, and the ‘real world’ of the audience watching the story’ (Pennington 2007, pp.99). In order to teach a critical perspective on race, she had to move from being a detached teacher to opening up or admitting her ‘personal thoughts’ on race, breaking her own silence, and encouraging the students to do the same. This was a collective narrative enquiry and a sharing of common experiences, which she says ‘was crucial and necessary to expose the positions and attitudes’ of both herself and her students, and in particular noting how those views had changed. As teachers teaching, it is a commonplace awareness that we need to ‘model good practice’, which is visible, experienced and open to scrutiny and judgment. But to lay bare our innermost thoughts and concerns – part of our very self and of the construction of our own identity as a teacher is a far more risky business, and requires ‘breaking the wall’. She herself admitted to feeling that ‘I was going beyond certain boundaries’. In a training session, entitled Unlearning Racism, Wahab and Gibson (2007) share some similar experiences, though they begin with a rather more ‘value-free’ vocabulary for pedagogy: ‘dialogue’, ‘making sense’, ‘making meaning’; but as they get into the autoethnographic account, the discourse changes as they realise the ‘shame’, ‘pain’, ‘fear’, ‘humiliation’ and ‘rage’ being experienced by their students as White racism is exposed for critical analysis. One of the participants in the training admits to feeling ‘destablised’ by this, uncertain whether to go on or retreat – ‘I cried in my seat all morning!’. Such stories remind us that as a research method, life history research has the potential to open up domains and dimensions of people’s lives that generate material more appropriate for counsellors than researchers, an issue which writers including Linden West have reflected upon in their work on biographical and life history research (West, 1996; 2004); and this has led others to think about the spiritual, theological and ethical issues involved in using biographical materials in teaching. A recent contribution to the role of autobiography in teacher training conceives such ethical issues as part of a reconfiguration or a renewal without really feeling a need to problematise this, since after all, the role of the adult educator covers a diversity of professional activities, including counselling (Dominicé, 2000; 2007, pp.241).

Autoethnography, pedagogy and performance

A further dimension of the use of autoethnographies as pedagogy is the notion of performance. In an earlier SCUTREA paper I reflected upon teaching as performance in the context of the postmodern challenge to the nature of pedagogy, whilst tracing back the meta-discourse of performance and performativity to Erving Goffman and his sociological predecessors (Armstrong, 2003). It is interesting, therefore, to see how autoethnography (unlike autobiography and life history) has subsequently been conceptualised as performance. The most substantial development of this conceptualisation in the context of pedagogy has come from Denzin (1997; 2003; 2006).
The idea of autoethnography as performance has been written about by others. For example, in the Bochner and Ellis (2002) edited collection, Jones (2002, pp.44) states that torch singing – ‘performing songs on unrequited love’ – is an autoethnographic performance. In the same collection, Scott-Hoy (2002) recognises autoethnography as both a product and a process, and relates her struggle with ways of representing autoethnographies and the art of story-telling. Having considered visual representation as a means of story-telling, she reflects on how difficult she finds story-telling whilst sitting or standing still:

They seemed to have too much energy, and to instil that energy in the teller. So, while telling the stories I added movements, gestures, changes in position and posture. These movements drew attention to the body that was telling the story, invited debate … I showed my audiences objects, ‘props’, which served to connect the ‘real’ and ‘created worlds, and stimulated the audience’s imagination, or triggered questioning … Pauses became important. Silences slowed down and held the audience’s attention as I endeavoured to take the audience with me …  (Scott-Hoy, 2002, pp.278)

Denzin’s perspective on performance is that research practices are not only performative and pedagogical but political. For him, as well as for me, through writing and talking, ‘we enact the worlds we study’; moreover, we enact ‘a critical cultural politics’ (Denzin, 2006, pp.333). This strongly echoes the ideas of Giroux (1992, pp.239) with respect to pedagogy as a form of cultural politics and production. The examples already cited on pedagogies of critical race theory remind us of our underlying struggle. With Giroux and Denzin, I believe that we have to find ways of connecting emancipatory discourse through critical pedagogies with ‘new ways of writing and performing culture’. With Denzin, I believe that autoethnographies offer a research-led pedagogy that can ‘contribute to radical social change, to economic justice, to a cultural politics that extends to critical race theory’ (Denzin, 2003, pp.1) as well as the ‘principles of a radical democracy to all aspects of society’ (Giroux, 2000, pp.x). In recognising the research/teacher as a social and cultural being, an actor learning to read the word, and to read the world with more critically perceptive vision and heightened political awareness, we are also echoing Freire and Macedo (1987) as they conceived literacy as a cultural politics which not only empowers literate people, but simultaneously disempowers those who are illiterate. Here I would through pedagogy extend the meaning of literacy to go beyond reading and writing the word, to reading the world, especially media, culture, history and politics – all of which require literacies.

**Critically reflecting on autoethnography as pedagogical practice**

However, there is a responsibility for those using autoethnography to incorporate critical reflexivity into their practice. Since those autoethnographies are characteristically already heavily reflexive, this is likely to lead us to a meta-criticality. We ourselves must recognise that autoethnographical work is still in its infancy, even if it has had a long period of gestation. We have a responsibility to pay heed to some of the criticisms aimed at the use of autoethnographies, as both research and teaching, including the apparent lack of criteria by which we can judge the ‘quality’ of autoethnographies, which is a concern of Andrew Sparkes. Sociologists are increasingly accustomed to reading personal writing as sociological data, but not yet used to evaluating those writings as analysis. The existing scientific discourse for such evaluation is, as qualitative researchers have been made well aware since Robson (2002), inappropriate. Yet, the need to be able to evaluate such research continues to be felt. Sparkes (2002, pp.223) hopes that we ‘can resist the temptation to seek universal, foundational criteria lest one form of dogma simply replaces
another’. He cites the argument provided by Garratt and Hodkinson (1998), that we should instead understand research (and teaching) as experience, and argue against identifying or selecting ‘as list of universal criteria in advance of reading a piece of research’. ‘A more constructive way forward’, argue Garratt and Hodkinson (1998, pp.527), ‘begins with the acknowledgement that the selection of criteria should be related to the nature of the particular piece of research being evaluated’. In other words, taking this relativist and heuristic position, we should make it up as we go along (Smith, 1993).

This argument is set in the context of another accusation made against the use of autoethnography – that of ‘self-indulgence’ (Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2002) or what Hufford (1995) in her review of Carolyn Ellis’s The Ethnographic I, calls the ‘ego-centric predicament’ – the appropriation of first person voice. Sparkes is aware that this is not unproblematic. He is particularly concerned that the use of autoethnographies entails a range of obligations, including

‘recognising our engagement in active, yet partial, meaning-making, recognising that [as researchers, writers and teachers] we will change others and our role as change agents need to be considered with great intentionality and sincerity; we have to be open to change; we have to tell others about our experiences and perspectives; we have to listen to the interpretations of other [researchers, writers and teachers]’ (Sparkes, 2002, pp.222).

References


Dominicé P (2007) ‘Educational biography as a reflective approach to the training of adult educators’ in L West, P Alheit, A S Andersen and Merrill, B (eds.) Using Biographical and


**Notes: the stories untold**

1 As an autobiographical aside, in discovering this work, I had cause to reflect on Denzin’s earlier work in criminology and the sociology of deviance that had impacted on my undergraduate and postgraduate learning, and in particular in terms of qualitative research methods that supported the data collection and analysis of my doctoral thesis using the life history method, which I submitted in 1977. A fuller autoethnographical account, written in a more appropriate narrative style, might have allowed me to tell this story of how I came to believe I had invented life histories. This would have included a reference to Nod Miller and other significant others in my academic career as a teacher and researcher. Nod recently (2007) said that I had made an important contribution to the field of adult education research.

2 Another story untold is how I came to autoethnography as pedagogy from my recent research into cultures of learning, drawing together ideas emergent from observing classroom practices and values over the past two or three years, including the significance of silence at the 2007 AERC/CASAE Conference and the 2007 SCUTREA Conference. In researching silence in teaching and learning, I uncovered Pennington (2007). This paper has begun to draw together fragments of my own autobiography, through a reflexive approach, including my wide academic and research interests and praxis in cultural politics, pedagogical practice, and media for critical literacy.

3 Three years ago, I was provided with an opportunity to be self-indulgent, when invited to contribute to a collection of adult educators’ autobiographies in honour of Phyllis Cunningham. The contributors were invited to write 3000 words. In telling my story, I just about managed to get to the end of my period of compulsory education before the word limit was reached. This is published in Keith Armstrong et al. eds (2007), but what is interesting to reflect on is that I have not included this piece of autobiographical writing in my list of publications (http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff.php?staff=48).

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