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It's all about 'me' with you: Exploring autoethnographic methodology

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Abstract

This article presents an excerpt from a longer dissertation which recorded face-to-face conversations with academic peers. It aims to challenge the preconceptions that often guide the thoughts and actions of tutors. Exploring the characteristics of 'autoethnography' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), the story-telling dynamics and biographical nature of this concept are projected through the lens of a fictional account. Using a multi-layered structure, the article blends a theoretical academic text (a literature review) with a fictional narrative to create a critically reflective account and present an alternative way of reporting qualitative research.

Keywords

conversation; critical reflection; autoethnography

In the pub

Sitting down at the table nearest the window, I position my pint on the heritage beer mat and fire-up the laptop. Whilst walking over to the pub, I had been mulling over ideas about the dissertation structure, the methodology (over and again), and a newly found saviour – 'autoethnography'.

The phone interrupts the chime of the computer starting up, and bleeps a message from Mike – 'Running late. Will be there in 30!' And so, I take the opportunity to revise the literature review of autoethnography due to be presented at the next dissertation group meeting.

The literature review: Autoethnography as methodology

Whilst researching the topic 'From pre-conception to me-conception: testing pedagogic assumptions through conversation' it became clear that a framework was required that would allow inner dialogues on pedagogy to be externalized – enabling me to seek out assumptions about teaching practice (Brookfield, 2012).

A methodology was needed that would allow the voice of the researcher to be acknowledged *and* visible. I needed a narrative process that would encourage systematic and critical reflection through both personal and scholarly writing formats. Traditionally writing has been separated into two genres, 'literary' and 'scientific'. Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that the goal of using personal narrative (as research) is to fuse the 'form' with the 'content' and the 'literary' with the 'scientific', creating a social scientific art form, to reveal the hand of the researcher rather than construct authority through absence.

The format of a dissertation can be fluid, bringing together personal stories, interview excerpts and other more standard components of research (Ellis, 2004). Traditional scientific approaches to writing are still predominant, requiring 'researchers to minimize their selves, viewing self as a contaminant

and attempting to transcend and deny it' (Wall, 2006, p.147). As I was trying to find a way of facilitating personal reflection as well as those gathered through (formal and informal) conversations with colleagues, I needed to develop an approach that would support inquiry through dialogue and conversation, a way of facilitating critical reflection, encompassing the many research components brought together in a dissertation. An auto-ethnographic approach provided a way of acknowledging the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural, in order to make room for non-traditional forms of inquiry and expression (Wall, 2006).

In anthropology, ethnography is traditionally accepted as a study of the 'other'. By contrast autoethnography 'lets you use yourself to get to culture' (Pelias, 2003, p.372). It is 'part auto or self and part ethno or culture' (Ellis, 2004, p.31). First coined in 1966 by Raymond Firth in a seminar about philosophical structuralism (Hayano, 1979), autoethnography is a mode of self-reflective or introspective writing that connects personal autobiography and experience with broader social, cultural meanings and contexts. It 'opens up a space of resistance between the individual (auto-) and the collective (- ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of singularity cannot be foreclosed' (Lionnet, 1990, p.391).

Unlike other approaches associated more with qualitative empirical research, autoethnography embraces subjectivity, emphasizing the researcher as the 'instrument of research'. Maréchal defines autoethnography as 'a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing' (2010, p.43). This acknowledges and legitimises subjective stories about experiences and how they contribute to our understanding of the social world, providing a basis for my reclaiming the first person in my own dissertation writing.

Autoethnographers are not totally introspective, they 'research themselves in relation to others' (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014, p.17). As a result, approaches to autoethnography vary, and can be characterised according to differing relationships between the person, the broader social and cultural setting and the research topic. Using social interaction as well as personal first-hand experiences, the researcher deconstructs their own discourses and describes and/or critique systems, practices, cultures and experiences. As a methodology autoethnography 'acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters and assuming they do not exist' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p.275).

Although ethnographic studies often present a sensitive understanding and portrayal of another's experience, 'nothing can take the place of someone speaking from their own position' (Yomtoob, 2014, p.145). In response, Ellis and Bochner outline a form of autoethnography that is 'evocative' or 'emotional' (2006). The 'evocative' approach foregrounds the writer's personal story, and utilises feelings, thoughts and emotions, systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to make sense of experience (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p.737). However, this approach can overshadow the social and cultural context. By contrast, 'analytic autoethnography' as described by Anderson (2006) describes ethnographic work in which the researcher is a full member of a research group or setting. They are committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. The 'analytical' stance is defined by a set of 'key features':

1. complete member researcher (CMR) status,
2. analytic reflexivity,
3. narrative visibility of the researcher's self,
4. dialogue with informants beyond the self,
5. commitment to theoretical analysis

(Atkinson, 2006, p.378)

Whichever approach is adopted, autoethnography offers the opportunity to reflect on professional practice in a personal and authentic manner. Within the scope of this study, it appeals as it occupies 'an intermediate space [...] a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life' (Behar, 1996, p.174).

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) observe two primary ethical dimensions of autoethnography, the first being procedural ethics involving approval from relevant institutional bodies or committees and the second is ethics in practice or, what could be referred to as, the everyday ethical issues that arise as part of the research. Analytic autoethnography as an approach has five 'key features' (Anderson, 2006, p.378) and provides an effective means of investigating the focus of the research, namely, the ways in which dialogue and conversation between peers can facilitate critical reflection about subjective assumptions in teaching practice. The narrative aspect of the research can move beyond 'evocative' or 'emotional' expression as espoused by Ellis and Bochner (2000; 2006, 2011), and include analysis of academic theories and texts, highlighting connections to broader themes.

Acknowledging 'the academic' as part of the personal narrative rigour in the research process (-graphy) emphasizes their role, and the narrative structure can do more than just tell stories. This approach to writing reports 'scholarly and justifiable interpretations' beyond the researcher's personal opinions, which are supported by other data to confirm or triangulate them (Duncan, 2004, p.5).

Collecting multiple sources and types of data, such as iterative conversational exchanges and cycles of reflection as well as engagement with scholarly theory, is intended to develop an inquiry and expand data collection. Within this study, this cycle intends to help to establish my findings as analytical and scholarly rather than purely emotional or evocative. The intention for the research is not to reveal a world that has been visited and studied; my intention is instead, to show how I have made sense of that world by studying and reflecting on my own assumptions about it.

My role as a teacher affords me the ability to be co-participant and an authentic 'insider' in the culture under analysis. Using an autoethnographic mode of inquiry, I am an 'emotional participant' (Lysaght, 2009), able to access first hand perspectives on contemporary pedagogical practice. Personal insights and reflections add depth to the 'data'.

Some researchers observe the drawbacks – the 'subjective' or even narcissistic connotations of autoethnographic or personal narrative genres, when used to write up qualitative research. However, research of this nature involves a complex reflexive process and journey to understanding, which offers the potential for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of their motivations and preconceptions. This sentiment is echoed by Lutrell, who suggests that 'what we are able to know depends upon attention to interpersonal encounters and how well we know ourselves in ethnographic relationships' (2003, p.152–153).

Back in the pub

I take off my glasses and ponder. A few minutes later Mike appears in his 'artist' costume.

"Finally!" I say, feigning exasperation.

"Sorry I'm late, I had an issue with one of the paintings," Mike looks angry.

"Do tell."

"It wasn't 'talking to me'... I couldn't get the dialogue going... Oh no! I sound like you! I definitely need a drink now."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I say.

"Want another one?" Mike points to my empty glass.

"Well, go on then, if I must!"

"You must!"

Mike returns with drinks and crisps. "So how's the methodology going?"

"Get you with the academic lingo!" I say.

"Oh yes, I get it from this friend of mine, he's roped me into this dissertation thing he's doing and it's all he ever talks about. He sends me texts to read and his terminologies have infiltrated my brain. He's started eating 'Olde Spicy Tomato' crisps, and challenging my artistic fashion sense."

"He sounds like a very interesting man, I think you're lucky to know him," I sagely respond.

"Mmm. Well, come on then, what's this '*methodology revelation*' you've messaged me about?"

"Well, as you know last time we met up I was having a dissertation induced crisis about the methodology. I was struggling to find the right framework, remember?"

"I sure do."

"Well, that was until I had a chat with Betty Stamford, my tutor, and she introduced me to the wonders of *Autoethnography!*" I open my arms wide, in emphasis of my methodology saviour.

"Auto-what?"

"Auto. Ethno. Graphy," I reply in staccato fashion.

"Don't tell me – it's the study of cars in their natural habitat," Mike offers sarcastically.

"Oh, very droll. No, it's really very good, and I think it's going to give me the thing I've been looking for, the right framework for the job. It's also very postmodern, so I'm sure you'll approve!"

"Explain it then."

"Well, '*Auto*', refers to the individual or 'the self', '*Ethno*' refers to the 'collective' or the 'culture' and '*Graphy*' is the 'writing' or the application of the research. Simple as that. The emphasis on each bit does seem to vary depending on the research or the researcher, which means there is no one accepted approach or outcome. One of the writers, Sarah Wall, suggested the axiom that *an autoethnography by any other name is still an autoethnography.*"

"Expand a bit more. I know you want to."

"Well, it's an approach to qualitative research that seems to be more personal and human, and actually celebrates the evidence of the researcher's voice rather than hiding it. The main thing is that the researcher is the centre of the study."

"It's all about *me* with you isn't it? Any chance to get in the spotlight!" laughs Mike.

"Yes, I thought you'd like that. There's not an exact, singular definition of autoethnography, but in essence it's a form of personal narrative... a story. It positions the researcher as the focus of the research, but not exclusively. Account is also taken of the broader context, a sort of '*insider ethnography*' if you like. It's about the gaze being *inward* and also *outward*."

"Ah, the old *inside-out/outside-in* routine?" Mike winks and taps his nose.

"Exactly. It also ties in perfectly with 'Critical Reflection'."

"Ok. So when you say a story, what do you mean exactly?"

"I mean a story."

"So how is it academic?"

"Ah well, that's the argument that some people use against it, challenging its legitimacy. From the texts I've read so far, it appears to offer an interesting alternative to traditional ways of approaching qualitative research. There seem to be different takes on the biographical narrative form, but autoethnography is one of the most popular and adopted terms for this type of biographical narrative."

"Well, it does sound less dry than some of those other papers you've sent me. You'll have to let me read some."

"Ha, don't worry, I have a folder with your name on already!" I say, laughing.

"Why can't I keep my big mouth shut?" Mike theatrically draws an imaginary zip across his mouth. "Actually I'm quite enjoying my vicarious sojourn into academia, believe it or not."

"Ha! Seriously, I appreciate your interest. It's really useful having someone to talk things through with."

"Conversation and dialogue!" says Mike palms facing upward.

"Exactly. Conversation and dialogue!"

"So, how *are* you going to write it?"

"I'm not sure yet, I'm still trying to get a sense of how I can work with it."

"And when you say 'story', can it be fictional then?"

"Well, yes. It's a mixture. Within autoethnography there is one sort of dominant approach that's referred to as '*evocative*' or '*emotional*' autoethnography, which is championed by an academic couple called Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner. They developed it, and it's become the dominant approach in autoethnography."

"And what's their specific take on it?"

"Well, they're sort of at the radical end the genre, in that they distance themselves from the more realist, analytic ethnographic traditions."

"It does sound very postmodern."

"I told you. The writing approach they've developed does share postmodern sensibilities and is very sceptical about representations of *'the other'* and traditional epistemological assumptions. It acknowledges that there are many ways of knowing and privilege should not be given to one specific approach. The goal is not to dismiss traditional research methods entirely, but to question their dominance and offer other ways to acquire understanding and share knowledge."

"Mmmm. I like it. Well, you know me; I do like anything that challenges the accepted ways of doing something. So are you going to be all *'evocative'* and *'emotional'* from now on?"

"What d'you mean, "from now on"? How dare you sir! Actually, there is another approach, developed by an academic called Leon Anderson, that he refers to as *'analytic autoethnography'* that sort of sits alongside the *'evocative'* approach, but positions itself more within the *'analytic'* ethnographic tradition."

"Hence the title," says Mike.

"Hence the title. I think what I like about this method is the structure of the principles that define it as a methodology."

"Which are?"

"Hang on, I'm not that familiar with it yet, I'll need to read it out." I produce the printed version of my presentation I've brought to give to Mike. "This is yours by the way."

"Oh joy!" Mike says with a fixed grin.

"Ok, here we go. Anderson defines five key features of analytic autoethnography: *'complete member researcher status, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis'*. What d'you think?" I peer at Mike over my glasses.

"Sounds great, and it mentions reflexivity, and dialogue with others, so it sounds perfect for this."

"I know, that's why I was so glad to find it!"

"Cheers!" Mike says as he nudges his glass towards me. "It's your round!"

"I just need to get the narrative bit sorted out; the actual *story* that holds it together. I've been going round and around, but I can't get any traction on it. I've thought about something to do with a journey as a metaphor for the learning process, so I could use the linear aspect to reveal something emerging. I don't know. I'd really like something that allows me to tell a story and also bring in the academic stuff."

"Stuff... very academic," Mike says wryly.

"You know what I mean, I just need a specific narrative structure to thread it all together. I need a *thread*."

"Mmmm," Mike nods.

"Ok, I want a narrative plot line idea by the time I return from the bar, or I'll explain autoethnography to you again!"

"You know how to threaten people, don't you."

At the bar there's a large queue, so I browse the nibbles selection whilst I ponder my dilemma. I make a radical decision to buy some nuts instead. Nuts, nuts, this is my brain telling me I'm going nuts. I can't get this writing structure sorted out, I'm over thinking it. How do you under-think things? What do I need? I need an umbrella, or a coat hanger or '*something*' to hang this narrative from – or off – or alongside. I absently stare at the large flat-screen TV above the bar – the sound is off – Harrison Ford appears to be being interviewed about his career. I wave in the direction of the bartender, failing to catch his eye. Glancing up at the screen again, I recognise the final scene from *Blade Runner*, where a younger, wetter Harrison Ford is lying on a rain sodden rooftop, at the mercy of his android bounty. That's when it hit me, "Yes!" I exclaim out loud; which turns all the heads at the bar, fortunately including the bartender's. "What would you like?" he asks.

I finally return to the table. "I've got it!" I say, still gripping the peanuts between my teeth.

"You've got peanuts? I can see that," Mike replies.

I drop the nuts onto the table. "No, I've got it! I've got the narrative idea. It's just come to me now!"

"Go on then, I'm all ears." Mike starts on the nuts.

"Grade Runner!"

"What?"

"It's a take on *Blade Runner*: A dystopian future world, where state-funded education has collapsed, and corporate owned androids sell knowledge to the highest bidder. Education has devolved back into an Industrial Age scenario of rote learning and received wisdom. Internet 'fact finding' is the accepted measure of knowledge," I look at Mike.

"Go on," he says.

"Ok, the droid lecturers are networked together, and start to 'simplify' knowledge into collective 'common sense' units of meaning, to be imparted to students through monologues of downloadable data. Their collective assumptions become a unified belief system, an unquestioned educational hegemony of *Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Learning* reigns supreme." I pause to sip my pint. "New ideas or theories that do not align with accepted ideologies are banned; critical reflection and independent thought is illegal. Anyone caught challenging 'The Knowledge', is expelled permanently from education. I form an international

resistance group of underground academics, *The Assumption Hunters*, to reinstate inquiry, critical reflection and independent thought.”

“Sorry to stop you,” says Mike. “But could I just ask a question?”

“Yes?”

“Were you drinking Absinthe while you were at the bar?”

“What?”

“Well, it’s a bit…”

“What?”

“Eccentric. *Nuts*, maybe?” Mike holds up the packets of dry roasted in emphasis.

“Really?”

“A tad.”

I slump in the chair. “Oh, great, thanks. Thanks for nothing. I was getting into it then – I thought I was on it – I’m back to square one now.”

“Easy tiger,” Mike says reassuringly. “I’ve got an idea for your narrative structure. I did mull it over while you were ‘off with the androids’, and I think I may have a lucid solution to your woes.” Mike tries to reanimate me by prodding me with his finger. “Listen.”

“Go on,” I say glumly.

“Well, instead of this dystopian future android nonsense, why don’t you just have the narrative based around a series of meetings you have – let’s say for example in a pub a bit like this one – and you have conversations with a handsome younger artist about your project and about the other conversations you have with colleagues and together you discuss the assumptions you are exploring, and everything else.”

“Go on,”

“That’s it!”

“That’s what?”

“That’s the *‘thing’*, the narrative that links everything together. You can write about what you and he talk about, and the conversations with the other colleagues, and also put in the other academic stuff. Ta-da!” Mike beams at me.

I tap my lips with my finger and squint into the middle distance. “That is, actually, that’s quite good.”

“You see!” Mike theatrically places his fingers on his forehead. “The artistic mind at work!”

“Oh, that’s the smell of burning is it?” I reply sarcastically.

"The artist's brain working once again to clarify and consolidate academic confusion and solipsism." Mike raises a peanut held between his fingers. "That's it in a nutshell! It's cheers to me I think!"

"Cheers ears! I think that might actually work. Thanks." I raise my glass and we chink them together.

"Could you read through the literature review and let me know what you think, before Thursday?"

"More work? Your bill is getting out of control Mr. Drabble!"

"It's all for a good cause."

"Yes, 'cause' your dissertation needs to be done!"

On the walk home

We finish our drinks and leave. Mike gets into his suitably beaten-up 'art-mobile' and loudly disappears up the road. On the walk home I run through the new narrative structure in my head, and try to think of how I might be able to weave things together utilising Mike's idea. I start to laugh to myself about my fantastical, dystopian plot structure and for fun, start to run through some other equally fantastical options.

Tolkien The Talk – a classic *Quest* narrative in the form of a Gothic fantasy, in which I – the *magical hobbit* – must travel the land, *hunting assumptions* with my band of merry academics. Or *Gullible's Travels* – a *Voyage and Return* narrative where *Gullible* (the narrator and protagonist of the story) leaves his native home in *Hegemony*, and travels to the land of *Critical Reflection* where he is confronted with indigenous people who challenge his common-sense assumptions and accepted views on the way things are.

I start to laugh out loud at the zebra crossing, much to the consternation of the car occupants glaring at me through the glass. *The Tree of Knowledge*: in this story I'm the intrepid explorer hiking into an ancient and mysterious forest looking for the mythical '*Tree of Knowledge*'. With me I have the '*Magic Papers of Pedagogy*' that I read as I go. As I finish each page, I rip it off and drop it to the ground, leaving a paper trail allowing me to navigate my way back. As I travel deeper into the undergrowth various strange creatures meet me along the way who claim to know where the 'Tree' is – they engage me in conversations and riddles that I need to understand or answer to reach my goal. Smiling, I put my key in the front door and feel happy that Mike has broken the narrative deadlock: I have work to do.

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Biography

Neil Drabble has been teaching at London College of Fashion since 2013, and was appointed as Course Leader of BA (Hons) Fashion Photography in 2016. Neil successfully completed his PgCert in 2011 and was awarded Fellowship of the HEA. In 2016 he successfully completed an MA in Academic Practice. Academic research engaged with during Neil's MA has been utilised to inform talks with academic colleagues and peers within LCF's School of Media and Communication, looking at pedagogical aspects of 'Conversation, Communication and Collaboration' and 'Learning Environments'. Neil has been the recipient of the prestigious Arts SU & UAL 'Highly Commended' teaching award on numerous occasions, and was winner of the principal Arts SU & UAL Teaching Award in 2016. Neil's photographic work has been purchased for the primary collections of National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and his work has been included in numerous exhibitions both nationally and internationally.