

The Art of Reflection and Self-Study in Student and Teacher Development

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The American Educational Researcher Association (AERA) defines the purpose of humanities-oriented research as exploring and understanding forms of human existence and the relationships among reason and emotion (2009). Humanities-oriented research in the field of education explores how reason and emotion are presented in school practices and in the formation of citizens while fostering discord in order to suggest alternatives (AERA, 2009). This form of research attempts to gain an understanding of the explicit and implicit meanings of education, such as, student and teacher development, and points out the tensions and contradictions, compares and critiques on ethical or value-oriented grounds, and investigates the discourses that human beings utilize in their social life (AERA, 2009). Within humanities related research, educational researchers increasingly use autobiographies, autoethnographies, and journals for a variety of reasons. Individual autobiographies, autoethnographies, and journals, although sometimes lacking significance and quality, do provide the means for individual self-study and self-reflection (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001). These serve as “the history of lives” and common to these forms of self-study and self-reflection is the involvement by the learner and often the teacher/researcher with the goal to improve learning and teaching (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The process of self-study and self-reflection prove a valuable educational research method in student and teacher development by means of journaling, autobiography, and autoethnography. We will prove this by exploring the framework of Reflectivity Theory and Constructivism and then discussing the importance of self-study through the forms of autobiography, autoethnography, and journaling in student and teacher development.

The Use of Constructivism in Humanities-Oriented Research

When humanities are applied to educational research, it forces the researcher to focus a critical eye on established educational practices, processes, and the assumptions that underlie them. The humanities remind the educator that the preeminent focus of education is on the individual (American Education Research Association, 2009). When viewing an educational problem through the humanities lens, the constructivism or critical social theory paradigms are most appropriate.

Unlike a positivist who would assert one can discern an objective social reality (i.e. all first year students are alike and see things in a similar manner), a constructivist assumes that each individual constructs their own reality so that there are multiple constructed realities among a population of students being researched. By its very definition, the constructivism paradigm recognizes that social reality is constructed individually although these constructions are transmitted to members of a society by various social agencies and processes (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 22). As viewed by the researcher, each individual interpretation of reality is valid (Ponterotto, 2005). Given each individual constructs his or her own reality, the challenge for the educational researcher is discovering the individual’s sense of reality which makes the use of autobiography, autoethnography, and reflective/learning journaling as powerful tools in educational research.

Gall et al. (2007, p. 23) noted each of us constructs a self, one private that we keep to ourselves, and one social which is on display to others. They caution that the researcher’s challenge is finding ways to unveil each of these identities. A constructionist also recognizes the dependency on input from the individual and the potential for false positives based on individuals camouflaging their

own interpretation of true reality in order to appease the researcher (Gall et al., 2007). This interaction between the investigator or researcher and the individual is a central issue within constructivism, whereby knowledge and understanding are co-created between the respondent and the researcher (Lee, 2012).

There are critics of the constructivism paradigm whom claim there are inconsistencies in the paradigm and additionally highlight the researcher's challenge to evaluate and interpret these multiple constructions of reality (Lee, 2011). While recognizing these criticisms, it does not refute constructivism's value to the importance of student centered learning as well as the importance of individual perceptions and emotions to enable learning and to foster persistence and resilience in students (Bergh, Kruger & Naude, 2014). Constructivism supports an institutional view that places value on experiential and cooperative learning, as well as one that fosters programs and activities to meet the needs of student cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development.

The Link to Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Axiology

The humanities-oriented research, using literature and narrative, interplays between ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological dimensions. Meretoja (2014) explores theorists that are divided on the notion that the use of literature and narrative in research is a primary cognitive instrument for imposing meaning and order onto human reality or experience and the notion that narrative is a primary ontological category that characterizes the human way of being in the world that is constitutive of human existence. Philosophers have varying arguments on whether historical accounts retrospectively project a narrative order on events. Louis Mink and Hayden White acknowledge that narratives do play an important role in making a sense of reality but suggest that there is a deeper level at which human lived experience is non-narrative (Meretoja, 2014).

Theorists rely on a certain ontological conception of the real and of the nature of human existence (Meretoja, 2014). There is a certain ontology underlying every literary work which is a view of human existence and reality. Meretoja (2014) states that the ontological significance of narratives is the effect on our being in the world; they take part in the making of the intersubjective world and affect the ways we act in the world with others.

The humanities-oriented narrative view of epistemology, as a certain conception of our known situation in the world, helps to organize chaotic reality into a meaningful order (Meretoja, 2014). The act of telling does not solely award epistemic status to a teacher/students' life stories because there is an ambiguity created with a lack of connection between person and practical knowledge, for example, the teacher's life story and their teaching practice (Caduri, 2013). Caduri (2013) goes a step further to note that the research must provide a plausible reconstruction of the events along with meaning and repercussions of the teacher's practice in order for the argument to be accepted.

The methodology uses storytelling, such as observation and interviews of students and teachers, which helps to study the subjectivity and influence of culture and identity on the human condition (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). The story itself is the object of the study so the focus is on the individuals or groups making sense of events and actions in their lives by examining the story. This can be done through surveys, questionnaires, and quantitative analysis of behavior, but also using the story metaphor to capture meaning embodied within stories. Mitchell and Egudo (2003) advocate using this methodology as a reference point for narrative investigations in the effects of cultural change, transferring knowledge through implicit communication, constructing identity, aiding education, contributing to sense-making and studying decision making.

In the pursuit of 'truth,' researchers try to remove more of the human element to increase the

objectivity and increase the power of the methodology through their studies. The truths of the world can be captured not by believing that it evolves out of knowing, but rather by being (Rodriguez, 2002). This creates the teacher as both knower (knowledgebase) and being (experience) when conducting research for student and teacher development. The difference between narrative and experience should not be lost in epistemological, ontological, and ethical grounds. One cannot draw a hard line between living and telling without identifying them together since this would undermine “the possibility of ethically evaluating and discussing narrative interpretations of experience” (Meretoja, 2014, p. 93).

Reflectivity Theory: A Means of Studying Student/Teacher Development

Similar to humanities related research, the idea of reflectivity suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity (Procee, 2006); however, the idea of reflective thought has been incorporated into fields of learning, problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making (Van Sickle, 1985). Within education, the concept and practice of reflection has been linked to supporting student development, learning, improving writing proficiency, and critical thinking, as well as for professional development of educators by connecting theory to practice. While the concept of reflective practice is not new within Western philosophy, its widespread use within education and educational research is and viewed by some as a promising innovation in education (Procee, 2006).

A key American theorist who advocated for the inclusion of reflectivity in education was John Dewey. As noted by Van Sickle (1985), Dewey highlighted in *Experience and Education* (1933) the need for learners to reflect carefully, persistently, and actively on their beliefs and previous knowledge. For Dewey, reflective practice during the educational experience was essential for students to draw lessons from their experience in

order to make learning pertinent and permanent (Van Sickle, 1985).

The individual learner must possess the right attitude for reflection. The student attitudes that support reflection include being open-minded, having a willingness to test one’s beliefs and to postpone judgment or action, valuing knowledge and thinking, and intellectual consistency in thinking (Van Sickle, 1985, p.6). As noted by Kinsella (2007), other educational theorists, such as Argriz (1974) and Kolb (1974), would build upon the idea of reflection and its importance in learning and for developing educational practitioners.

While reflective thought and practice are inherent in student autobiography, autoethnography, and journals, their use serves as valuable sources of information when used by the practitioner and researcher. Kinsella (2007) identified the importance of practitioners challenging their own educational thinking and practices in order to identify alternative ways to improve their performance. For the researcher, the examination and use of these reflective instruments, such as learning journals, can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and usefulness of their educational practices as viewed by the individual learner (Morrison, 1996).

Three Methods to Achieve Reflection

Autobiography

Biographical research and writing is the history of life within literature and, of which, autobiography is a form (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). It is a delicate balance between the private experience providing insight and solution to public issues and the public theory providing insight and solution to private trials, which is the central challenge to those who work in autobiographical/self-study research. To negotiate this balance requires quality self-study research (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). Data that researchers collect about themselves can be used in two ways. Some studies are very personal and most of the data collected is about the researcher. Other studies

involve a range of data that includes only some data about the researcher. For example, the researcher may be a participant in the study, keep a personal journal, or keep a record of their thoughts and feelings as part of the process of ensuring that the data generation and analysis is varied (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003).

The appeal of a self-study is the focus on the recognition between the person and the play of power in self-formation (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). Autobiographical research can explore individual lives with accessibility to one's own meaning and understanding (Bagnoli, 2004). To study a practice is to simultaneously study the self, which is a study in relation to others (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). Being able to engage with one's own data depends on understanding the defenses and sources of resistance of the material that is difficult, unexpected and sometimes extremely confronting (Tenni et al, 2003). Otherwise the temptation is to remove, ignore, or rationalize the information and thereby diminish the insights it may generate (Tenni et al, 2003). Researchers remain at the intersection of biography and history with their questions arising from concern about the interaction of the self-as-teacher educator over time with others who represent a shared commitment to the nurturing and developing of students and their interaction on self and other (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). To join biography and history causes the issue to be confronted by the self and shows relationship to and bearing on the context which is when the self-study moves to research (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001).

Studying autobiographies is a significant source for examining student-teacher interaction and beliefs and the way they are analyzed (Narvaez, Ramirez, & Vasco, 2013). The answers they provide regarding how students start framing their understanding about learning is by looking at their learning histories (Narvaez et al., 2013). Contributions of these studies help us understand student-teacher conceptions and the role they play in their education by rethinking the education programs content and their conceptions behind the

theories presented in such programs, as well as providing opportunities to examine and challenge their preexisting knowledge (Narvaez et al., 2013). Some of the outcomes when exploring autobiographies have to do with the rediscovery of memories, the development of new perspectives on teaching, the discovery of reasons behind personal belief systems or the proclamation of new ones (Narvaez et al., 2013). The willingness to see, confront and discover oneself in the practice and to learn from this is the focus of the study and central to the foundation of quality data (Tenni et al, 2003). The narrative helps to make sense of our experiences (Meretoja, 2014). In the unending quest of self-understanding, emphasis has been placed on the identity of the student and teacher by stressing the importance of relating the personal with the professional as well as the teaching and learning (Narvaez et al., 2013).

Autobiographies as a way of narrative have become principal in the education field and have become a lens to explore and facilitate understanding of teaching practices while diving into the what, how, and why of pedagogical actions (Narvaez et al., 2013). Autobiographers explore the narrations that are used to explore beliefs and practices and find a way to bring together who the teachers are as people, their sense of self, their knowledgebase, and understanding of their practices as well as the social, historical, and cultural values they practice (Narvaez et al., 2013). Focusing on one's own life experiences helps to access and build on the inner beliefs, values, and understandings that guide teaching practices (Narvaez et al., 2013). The role of the researcher as autobiographer and the interaction between the participants' and the researcher's subjectivities is an important component of the autobiographical approach. Autobiographical self-study is based on people's lives grounded in their social and professional circles, just as they are considered within the network of others and not in isolation from their context, so too the researcher's subjectivity is present throughout the research, and can uncover themes presented throughout the study (Bagnoli,

2004). Autobiographies are an instrument for these students and teachers to look at their beliefs, conceptualizations, thoughts, and actions in the present (Narvaez et al., 2013). They are already influenced by experience from the past and expectations for the future so the autobiographies are able to capture the fullness of prior experiences to allow for critical analysis of those experiences and beliefs in order to comprehend the complexity of understanding, teaching, and learning (Narvaez et al., 2013).

To publish autobiographical self-studies, the burden of proof relies heavily on the biographical data which can give weight to the quality of the self-study research (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). The article should be engaging, themes represented in the conversation or narrative should be evident and identifiable, there should be an apparent connection between the autobiography and the history, and the issues researched should be vital to teaching or education (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). There is tension between the self and practice so the balance must be the evidence in what data was gathered and presented and how it was analyzed and brought together in conversation (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). The evidence presented should afford the readers no difficulty in determining authenticity of the scholarly voice (Bullough & Pinegar, 2001). This self-study research makes it possible for the students and teachers to be fully involved as authors of their own autobiography. The open and participatory nature of the research allows them to contribute as much or as little as they want in their own professional and personal development (Bagnoli, 2004).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of research that utilizes the basic tenets of ethnographical research through an insider's or autobiographical perspective (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Hoppes, 2014). Due to this nature, autoethnography has the ability to be both method and product (Ellis et al., 2011). This particular methodological approach arose from a general unhappiness in the realm of social science

and the "canonical" methods of knowing that preceded the postmodernist movement of the 1980s (Ellis et al., 2011). During this shift more credence was given to research as a politically and socially conscious undertaking and a general downplay of the importance of the universal narrative (Ellis et al., 2011). The blend of aesthetic and evocative self-reflection and qualitative research make autoethnography a valuable instrument in the exploration of personal development, experience, and learning practices (Ellis et al., 2011; Hoppes, 2014). These texts provide accessible information that may have the power to reach a broader audience that the traditional canonical forms of research tend to ignore (Ellis et al., 2011).

The methodology employed in autoethnography includes discussion, reflection, note taking, emotional recall, and the formulation of themes and categories with the general hope of producing a product that simultaneously provides the viewpoint of both the participant and the researcher (Hoppes, 2014). The subject matter to be studied usually presents itself in the form of an "epiphany" (Ellis et al., 2011). These are generally events that impact the trajectory of one's life or a period of existential crisis that drive introspective processes (Ellis et al., 2011). Through this dual role process autoethnography has the power to provide meaningful insight into identity as well as cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011; Hoppes, 2014).

Formal and informal immersion into subject matter can provide a rich and meaningful description of key aspects in teacher development. Personal experience, self-study, and background have also been a source of narration for teacher development (Nethsinghe, 2012). Topics that have been explored include the introspection of experience that leads to teacher development (Franca de Souza Vasconcelos, 2011; Henning, 2012; Nethsinghe, 2012). Autoethnographical methodology was used to identify the themes of need for control in the learning process, self-directed learning behavior, and strategies for combating isolation in studying teachers undergoing online learning instruction (Henning, 2012).

Teachers involved in continuing education tend to be high on initiative, persistent, disciplined, confident, have a desire to learn, and have the ability to use goal directed behaviors (Henning, 2012). These themes were under the assumption that faculty could be motivated by the desire to be innovative and better serve their student populations (Henning, 2012). Past personal experience was also seen as a fuel for teacher development. Franca de Souza Vasconcelos (2011) stated that her past experiences with teachers with different personalities, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and variation of teaching techniques all played a role in her personal development as a teacher. Exposure to expository, lecture, conversational, and participatory teaching styles also played a role in developing the individual as a current practitioner (Franca de Souza Vasconcelos, 2011). The exposure to teachers who displayed a genuine humanity and a sense of humility, faith and trust were also described as being a vital aspect of personal teaching style (Franca de Souza Vasconcelos, 2011).

In the arena of student development, common themes that lead to understanding typically involve analysis of personal history (Brookfield, 2011; Fong, 2009; Forrest, Judd, & Davidson, 2012; Hoppes, 2014; Jones, 2009). An autoethnography conducted by Fong (2009) sought to explore and reflect on what aspects of a spiritual life would help lead to an increase in student development. The undergraduate student population in question was one of lower socioeconomic status and, according to the author, in need of character education (Fong, 2009). In order to accomplish this type of education the author described in narrative form different techniques that she had utilized in the classroom. Writing assignments based on class readings forced students to reflect on their behavior, thought patterns, need for improvement, and overall being. The use of shared narrative experience leading to multiplicative levels of understanding is what the author refers to as “synergy” (Fong, 2009, p. 91).

A second autoethnography conducted by Forrest, Judd, & Davison (2012) sought to explore

and narrate student development in non-traditional undergraduate students when coursework contained various elements of uncertainty. Uncertainty in this case means a college course that lacks rigid structure. Tests and lectures were replaced solely with student driven discussion of course material. Fear and uncertainty were some of the main themes of the narratives early on in the report. Later the themes changed to an increased understanding of difficult material and application of knowledge to novel situations and expectations (Forrest et al., 2012). The most powerful content in the narrative, however, were the students’ insights into how they were able to bridge their personal and academic lives, the nonlinear nature of research and learning, and bring the heart and soul into the classroom as well as the mind (Forrest et al., 2012).

Faculty-Student and Tutor-Student relationships have also been examined under the autoethnographic lens. Openness, motivating characteristics, enthusiasm, humility, and helpful guidance were attributes that students found favorable in a faculty mentor (Moore, Scarduzio, Plump, & Geist-Martin, 2013). Similarity to the mentor, passion for learning, proactive self-starting behavior, and an eagerness to embrace challenges were attributes that a particular mentor found desirable in students (Moore et al., 2013). Boundaries, learning, supervision, and therapy were some of the key themes that arose in an autoethnographic study of relationships between tutors and students (Gardner & Lane, 2010). The relationship of tutor and student should have a foundation of trust, empathy, and learning. Reflexive exploratory writing can help to define role clarity as well as allow participants to have a voice for their needs and expectations (Gardner & Lane, 2010).

Journaling

The use of journals in both literature and history is well known and has a long pedigree in both disciplines. Increasingly journals are being used to support student learning in fields as diverse as management and psychology, in teacher and

professional education, and as a tool to support student development and retention (O'Connell & Dymont, 2006). Less defined in the literature is guidance on the role and use of journals as a researcher's tool and the use of journaling by researchers to support and reflect on their own research efforts.

Many educators and theorist have linked reflection to learning and the positive effects of using learning journals for reflection (Sheridan & Dunne, 2012; Goldberg, 2010). Journal writing is a student centric activity by actively facilitating reflection on the subject content and connecting the current lesson to prior experience or learning. It also supports the development of critical thinking skills by engaging the learner at a deeper level of synthesis and analysis as well as enhancing writing skills (Dunne & Sheridan, 2012; O'Connell & Dymont, 2006; Everett, 2013).

The instructor also benefits by the use of a reflective learning journals primarily by enabling better communication between student and teacher. Journals provide insights into the thought process of the student and provide clues to the level of mastery and comprehension of the material (Brand & Hubbs, 2005). Furthermore, journals may also indicate to the instructor when concepts need elaboration or where lesson plans need to be changed (Everett, 2013).

Adult learners and those seeking professional certification, such as in teaching, greatly benefit from experiential learning. As noted by Goldberg (2010), Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning as a process of having a concrete experience, reflecting on it and drawing conclusions from that experience, and lastly developing new ideas that can be applied to a new experience. Reflective journaling supports experiential learning by providing a tool to capture insights and to develop a deeper level of understanding in accordance with Kolb's model (Goldberg, 2010).

Reflective journaling is also a tool to support a student's transitioning into higher education, their retention in college, and in their

overall development (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013). Given the many challenges experienced by first year university students, a reflective journal can enhance a student's resilience (Everett, 2013). Studies highlight the benefits of reflective journaling specifically among first year college students by increasing their sense of well-being to meet the academic, personal and social challenges; offers them an opportunity to personally dialogue with a faculty member; and provides a means to gain insights and a deeper understanding of themselves (Dunne & Sheridan, 2012; Everett, 2013).

Attitudes about the benefit of journaling vary widely among students and faculty. For example, in one study, faculty members agreed that learning or reflective learning journals were helpful in encouraging higher order thinking and linking practical experience to the course material, yet 40-60% of the student journals reviewed failed to meet faculty expectation (O'Connell & Dymont, 2006). Some students indicated keeping a journal as a nuisance and indicated they would not keep one unless required (O'Connell & Dymont, 2006).

The mixed attitudes about the usefulness and quality of journaling among students and faculty are due to a variety of reasons. Students may lack the skills or knowledge to support effective reflection (Everett, 2013). The instructor may need to illustrate for the students the qualities found in an effective learning or reflective journal as well as providing sufficient feedback to the learner during journaling (O'Connell & Dymont, 2006). Finally, if the student does not trust the journal reader, the student reflections may be shallow.

For effective learning or reflective journaling, a series of pre-conditions, some ethical, must be met. First, the syllabus must establish the requirement and purpose of the reflective or learning journal. Secondly, privacy issues to include how information will be handled and treated must be explicitly stated. Lastly, the role and responsibility of the person monitoring the journal entries to include feedback requirements must be established (Brand & Hubbs, 2005; Everett, 2013).

Conclusion

Autobiographies, autoethnographies, and journals provide the means for teachers and students to perform self-study and self-reflection. The use of these forms in humanities-based research provides an opportunity to improve learning and teaching by requiring the involvement of the learner and the teacher/researcher. The concept of reflective thought provides insight into student development, writing proficiency, and critical thinking.

The use of autobiography helps to understand student and teacher conceptions on the role they play in education and an opportunity to examine and challenge preexisting knowledge (Narvaez et al., 2013). Autoethnography helps to define that role by providing a voice for needs and expectations which delivers the viewpoint of both research participant and researcher (Hoppes, 2014). Journaling, as another form of reflective learning, helps to create self-meaning in an academic context and conceptual perspective (Dunne & Sheridan, 2012). These research methods provide unique insight into the role that students and teachers play in their development by drawing on their prior knowledge and shared experiences, and considering the various arguments in order to provide innovative outcomes in the field of education.

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