
Autoethnographic Journeys in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT In this article, the author describes how the methodological approach of autoethnography enabled her to interrogate the philosophical underpinnings of the learning and teaching practices that she espoused as a university academic. This critical questioning was provoked through her interactions with postgraduate students from a range of contexts and academic traditions in a School of Education in a university in the United Kingdom. Through personal reflections and conversations with her 'selves' on her teaching and on her supervisory relationships with doctoral researchers, the author strives to show how she reduced her reliance on familiar ideas and changed the shape of her teaching through questioning her 'selves', beliefs and values. The value of autoethnography in enabling this critical exploration when working in an international European higher education context is highlighted. An aim is to encourage greater use of this methodological approach in European higher education research to enable greater sensitivity to our diverse constituencies.

Scene 1. A Conversation with Myself (selves) about Critical Thinking

'Your writing would have more academic authority if you were to substantiate your anecdotal claims by making more consistent reference to previous research'. I flush with embarrassment as I re-read the words I have written on the feedback form for his assignment. I have a responsibility to give him this feedback. It will help him to develop his writing so that it is commensurate with the expectations of postgraduate level work. Good academic writing demonstrates a balance between consideration of the words and ideas of others and critical reflection on the extent to which they apply – or not – in one's own context and experience. It also necessitates the ability to question and challenge existing knowledge and the social order. But, I also believe that anecdote has a place in academic writing, in that it can generate new knowledge 'by insisting on the ... moment, as the site of productive thinking' (Gallop, 2002, p. 5). Each of these positions is mediated by a set of beliefs and values about what constitutes academic practice. The first one is a tradition that is privileged in my United Kingdom (UK) context and one with which many readers, in particular those in other European contexts, will be familiar. It is, however, an academic practice that is much less favoured in other parts of the world, in particular those where writers prefer consensus to dissension. The 'critical thinking', to which I attach so much importance, is 'inspired by Marxist tradition and based on the use of reason to examine historical and social realities to uncover hidden forms of domination and exploitation' (Vandermensbrughe, 2004, p. 419).

'But', I asked myself, 'isn't he doing a degree with a British university? Surely that means he should adhere to our academic traditions?'.

'Should he?'. 'Are those academic traditions considered to be so superior? Do we know what our "academic traditions" are and, if we do, why we continue to privilege them in a twenty-first century replete with postmodern and post-structuralist exhortations to value "other" "local"'

knowledges and practices? Why do we not find out about his academic traditions and acknowledge their significance?’.

‘But I thought you prided yourself on your familiarity with his academic practices in Hong Kong? Haven’t you come to understand that they are derived from Confucianism, which places more importance on the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge, privileging critical reflection rather less? Why, then, in your feedback to this student, do you not draw on this knowledge but continue to display, apparently, a lack of sensitivity to his approach? Why do you not celebrate his use of anecdote?’.

Scene 2. Reflecting on Supervision

They have assumed the Western constructions as universal ... In African Studies, historically and currently, the creation, constitution, and production of knowledge have remained the privilege of the West ... Western conceptual schema and theories have become so widespread that all scholarship, even by Africans, utilises them unquestionably. (Oyèwùmí, 1997, p. x, cited in Akoto, 2011)

I came across the words quoted above as I was reading a draft chapter in a PhD dissertation. Sika, a doctoral researcher from Ghana, weary of being asked to use literature to support her assertions, used fictionalised email correspondence with her father, and subsequently her mother, to draw attention to personal stories that supported her arguments. Through this creative method she infused local, oral stories into her writing to support her claims, thus subverting an academic convention that demanded that she cite documented sources to substantiate them. She shared the challenges she encountered, as she navigated the unknown landscapes of her PhD journey, with her parents. In addition, she shared with readers accounts that rendered significant her cultural background. Initially these imaginary conversations were with her father who was fascinated with her choice of narrative inquiry as her methodological approach and showed great interest in how this methodological journey would proceed. Sadly, he died before she completed her doctorate. The email correspondence then took place between Sika and her mother and recalled tales of the strength of the women in her family, together with personal stories about colonialism in Ghana, none of which would have found their way into the history books. In addition, she drew on her traditional Akan art through the use of symbols, accompanied by proverbs that carried messages about everyday life among the Akan people. Stories that represented aspects of her own history and culture were infused throughout her text so that parallels could be drawn with the narratives of her research participants, senior women administrators in Ghanaian universities.

I had supported, encouraged, cajoled her to take risks in her research and in her writing of it. She was convinced that she had to conduct her study in particular ways even though I had exhorted her to find her own path. She seemed mired in academic practices that had no meaning for her yet she regarded as so dominant that she feared rejecting them. I wanted her to challenge these perceptions about what a doctoral dissertation needed to consist of, perceptions that neglected her own local knowledge and customs. Yet it was through reading her writing – and the words she quoted from Oyèwùmí – that I learned about her frustrations. In spite of what I had thought were robust, collegial conversations, it seemed that it was only through her writing that she felt able to communicate to me the strength of her feeling that she was in danger of subjugating herself to ‘Western conceptual schema and theories’. Was I, who had encouraged her to celebrate her local, contextual knowledge and to ensure that she thought carefully about whether narrative inquiry was an appropriate methodological approach in her context, also positioned as ‘assuming the Western constructions as universal’? Was this how she had felt about me through those three years we had worked together? Perhaps, in the end I could claim, tentatively, that I succeeded in my endeavours to encourage her to privilege her own stories, but then, why did this feel like a pyrrhic victory?

In the ‘scenes’ that I have described here, I have drawn upon two examples of learning and teaching practices in higher education that will be familiar to the majority of people reading this article. In the first one, providing feedback on an assignment, in the second, doctoral supervision. In both stories I share the constant tensions that I experience as an academic in a European university that describes – and markets – itself as ‘global’. On the one hand, I am challenging,

constantly, the appropriateness of what I consider to be dominant practices in learning and teaching in higher education in environments that are populated by those with a range of academic practices. On the other hand, I reveal the extent to which I continue to be influenced by particular perspectives when I indicate to students – in this case a student studying in Hong Kong – what constitutes ‘sound’ academic practice. In this article, my aim is to interrogate learning and teaching practices in higher education in the UK, and to reflect on the journey that has led me to critique my own practices. I have no desire to be self-indulgent in my writing, but to illustrate how autoethnography has been – and continues to be – valuable and powerful for me in enabling me to come closer to, not only the beliefs that I hold about learning and teaching, but also the source of those beliefs. I seek to show how this process has helped and continues to help me strive to learn from those whose histories are differently situated from mine, and therefore whose perspectives on learning and teaching are often similarly different. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate a place for this methodological approach in European higher education research.

Autoethnography and Higher Education Research

Academics’ autoethnographic accounts that reflect on their experiences and understanding of learning and, by implication, of teaching are rare. The use of this methodological approach where it occurs in educational research tends to be used by teachers in schools, following the seminal work of Clandinin and Connelly (e.g. 1995). Feuerverger’s (2011) use of autoethnography to retell accounts of immigrants’ and refugees’ experiences in an inner-city high school in Toronto is a recent and compelling example of the genre. What renders this writing so powerful, for me, is that Feuerverger’s own experiences as a refugee are woven throughout it, guided by the words ‘the portraitist’s reference to her own life story does not reduce the reader’s trust – it enhances it. It does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work; it gives them clarity’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 96, cited in Feuerverger, 2011, p. 363). Hernandez and Sancho, are two of the few people that I have encountered who have used autoethnography as a way of researching in higher education. In their case, they used it initially in their research into how university teachers managed change, realising that autoethnographic excavation of their own academic trajectories would bring them closer to their participants and, moreover, would render them less disingenuous in their methodological approach. Our experiences of autoethnography echo the words of Hayler (2011) that ‘valuable insights into the work and identity’ – in his case of teacher educators – ‘can be gained by examining our own memories and beliefs and [that] the narrative discourses through which we understand ourselves and our work are a source of rich description and insight’ (p. 1). Similarly, Sparkes in writing about the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2007 uses autoethnography in the sense of ‘selected personal experiences’ to enhance, for me, the informal interviews he conducted with academics at English universities to produce an inspirational ‘constructive process’ (p. 522).

One reason for the lack of autoethnographic research in higher education may be as Armstrong (2008) proposes:

As teachers teaching, it is a commonplace awareness that we need to ‘model good practice’, which is visible, experienced and open to scrutiny and judgement. But to lay bare our innermost thoughts and concerns – part of our very self and the construction of our own identity as a teacher is a far more risky business.

Aside from my curiosity about who determines the ‘good practice’ we need to model, I cannot argue with those words. Scrutinising and rendering visible to others how I construct my identities as a university teacher is risky, not only because it is not that common in my experience, but also because it renders me vulnerable and susceptible to criticisms of self-indulgence. Armstrong, like Pennington (2007), uses the term ‘autoethnographic pedagogy’ to describe how he uses it to ‘put the self [back] into teaching and learning’. Pennington shares how she translated ‘my autoethnographic qualitative research methodology into a pedagogical method for teaching [that was] crucial to understand my students’ perspectives along with my own’ (p. 96). Her experience reflects mine. When I embarked on my doctorate in 2001, I set out to understand how the postgraduate students with whom I was working perceived and experienced ‘our’ learning and teaching cultures in the UK. Before long I found myself delving into literature that discussed how

learning and teaching are conceptualised in myriad contexts. Because I was working with many students from Taiwan and China and also teaching in Hong Kong, the early part of this journey led me to the literature on learning and teaching in Confucian heritage cultures (CHC). I was captivated by what I found. Contrary to the stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner' as being passive and reluctant to participate in discussion (Kember & Gow, 1991; Turner & Acker, 2002), I discovered that questioning and discussion are practices that are encouraged, but *after* the learner has focused on understanding and acquiring concepts (Pratt et al, 1999; Watkins, 2000). Thus, a dominant belief that learning does not occur *through* discussion but *by* discussion following acquisition of 'knowledge' may explain an apparent reluctance to contribute to group discussions and to challenge the opinions of others. Silence, rather than communicating a lack of engagement in the process of learning – which is how I perceived it – is an active process used to reflect more deeply, in contrast to behaviour that may be seen as confrontational in the encouragement to be 'critical'. 'To be vocally and critically interactive for the purpose of learning ... can relate to other important cultural scripts' (Welikala & Watkins, 2008, p. 9). I favoured a Socratic approach in my teaching, an approach informed by 'I shall only ask him (*sic*) and he (*sic*) shall share the enquiry with me'. I learned that Confucian philosophy shares many similarities with this approach as Confucius employed dialogical methods, fostered informality in his relationships with students and believed that learning was transformative. I, too, believed and, indeed, had experienced, learning to be transformative and I employed similar practices to those described in my own teaching. But these early discoveries were double-edged swords. I began to stereotype and to make assumptions about students' behaviours based on where they came from. I now consider that to be reprehensible, but, on the other hand, several of the insights I gained have become really helpful in planning my teaching so that students gain the optimum learning and enjoyment from it. But, somewhat more importantly, I realised that it was disingenuous to be reading and talking with students about their perceptions of learning and teaching without questioning my own, hence the turn to autoethnography.

Learning

I have always loved learning. Embarking upon training to be a counsellor, as an adult learner, some 20 years ago, I was aware of some significant differences from my earlier learning experiences. I was encouraged to write in the first person; the learning was active and experiential and I relished the opportunities to discuss and to share ideas with others. I felt valued, not only for the life experiences that I had incurred, and could recount as relevant to training to be a counsellor, but also valued as a person. I connected Carl Rogers' (1951) humanistic philosophy, the theoretical approach to counselling that underpinned the training programme, with the student-centred approach to teaching. Subsequently, my Masters degree enabled critical engagement with other perspectives on learning, such as the andragogical theory of Malcolm Knowles (1990) and the transformative learning perspectives of Jack Mezirow (1991). My involvement with the university's Teaching and Learning in Higher Education training programme for academic staff encouraged me to articulate those philosophical concepts that informed my approaches to teaching. But I never really questioned them. They made sense to me. They fitted with the way I saw the world. They explained what I had experienced as an adult learner and they informed how I wanted to be as a teacher. I wanted to ensure that students in my classes had similar, positive experiences to me and I embraced student-centred teaching. Embarking on my doctoral research, I understood why I taught in the way I did, but I had never moved beyond the philosophical concepts to question their origins. Engaging with the literature on learning and teaching in CHC, and subsequently with literature on learning and teaching in other contexts, I realised that all learning and teaching practices are culturally mediated, rooted in particular ways of seeing the world. That the concepts of Knowles, Mezirow and Rogers that I had absorbed – uncritically – had emanated from a North American context that favoured individual development and that prized learning as an autonomous process. And perhaps, most profoundly, that if I wanted to create learning environments that were inclusive of all students, then I needed to recognise this ethnocentricity in my own practices.

Taking a Risk?

'The autoethnographer, by laying bare some aspect or aspects of her or his being is offering a story and taking a risk' (Brogden, 2010, p. 370). As I indicated earlier, I encountered autoethnography when I began my doctorate. I set out on that journey wanting to understand how postgraduate students from other contexts experienced being a learner in the UK. I was curious about what motivated 'international students' – including those from other European contexts – to come to the United Kingdom and I wanted to investigate their experiences of the learning and teaching environment. The study metamorphosed into one that embraced perspectives and experiences of all of the students with whom I was working at the time. I began to interrogate my own values, beliefs, perspectives, in particular on learning and teaching, and to understand how they were reflected in ethnocentric practices that may, unintentionally, exclude and marginalise students whose beliefs and values may differ. I found myself 'writing' about my 'self' in my learning and teaching 'cultures'. This intensely reflexive process led to other questions about my 'identities', in particular how I constructed my identities as a white, British woman, working with people from many different parts of the world. 'I learned how to initiate the "elephant in the room" discussion about my whiteness, sometimes voicing concerns I had heard over the years as an invitation for students to jump in and voice their own' (Barnett, 2011, p. 69). In autoethnography, one takes oneself and 'one's own ongoing experiences as the data':

Autoethnography seeks to make relevant those aspects of being that are suppressed by analytic strategies that draw a veil of silence around emotions and bodies. It becomes possible then to interrogate this lived experience theoretically, enabling the extension of theory and of ways of knowing and representing memory. (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 3)

So, interrogating my lived experience as a higher education practitioner in an environment that was increasingly diverse, enabled me to extend the theories of learning and teaching with which I was familiar, and to develop ways of working that sought to foster greater inclusivity in the learning context. But autoethnography attracts criticism for being 'irreverent, self-absorbed, sentimental and romantic' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 736). Irreverent? Yes – and deservedly so. Irreverence is important in academic research and in reflection on teaching as it enables the practitioner or researcher to snap at the heels of taken for grantedness. Self-absorbed? Well, Muncey's (2010, p. 2) experience of autoethnography emerging 'out of the iterative process of doing research, while engaging in the process of living a life' is an accurate reflection of my own experiences of being a practitioner–researcher in higher education. As I indicated earlier, it was – and is – through the autoethnographic process that the social and cultural aspects of my own life and my held beliefs about learning and teaching have been – and continue to be – exposed and questioned. I do not consider that process as 'self-absorbed'. I would describe it as 'illuminating' or 'crystallising' my own pedagogical position or perspective and thus helping me to develop a more sensitive insight into those aspects of others' lives – imperative I would claim in European contexts of twenty-first century global higher education.

And sentimental and romantic? If, by sentimental and romantic, we recognise the place of emotion, of affect, in research, in learning and teaching, as in life, then autoethnography is certainly sentimental and romantic. Those characteristics can enhance the reporting of research so that it resonates with the reader and encourages her or him to examine her or himself through the 'evocative power of the narrative text' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). Delamont (2009, p. 61) contrasts autoethnography, where the only object of study is the researcher, with 'reflexive autobiographical writing', which she proposes to have 'analytic and pedagogic power'. In this autoethnographic article, I am not the main 'object of study' as I cannot only write about 'me'. I have written about the student in Hong Kong and Sika. Including them in this article raises ethical complexities. Have I asked their permission to be included? 'Autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish ethically ... It is normally impossible for others to be disguised or protected in autoethnography' (2009, p. 59). Sika has given her permission; the student in Hong Kong has not, but is disguised sufficiently so that his identity is protected.

Postmodern ideology appeals to me because it exposes the flaws in our traditional reliance on neutrality and objectivity. It says that we cannot separate ourselves from what we do. It breaks

down dominant structures that seek to exclude the contributions of others. I like that. (Wall, 2006, p. 156)

I like that too. I cannot separate myself from what I do. I do not leave my many selves at the door when I enter the classroom. And, I was not very far into my doctoral journey before I began to want to break down what I perceived to be dominant structures of learning and teaching that excluded the contributions of others – those others being people who came to study with us from many different contexts. I cannot help but think about what I do as a teacher because I want to be a ‘good’ teacher. I am a ‘reflective practitioner’. Training to be a counsellor, reflecting and reflexivity became second nature to me. I imbibed – without question – these notions, but I have since also critiqued the concept of reflexivity, recognising that it is yet another discourse that is steeped in Eurocentric ideas (Trahar, 2011).

Back to Thinking about Doctoral Supervision

Espino et al (2010), in writing about their experiences as ‘Latina doctoral recipients’, discuss how the ‘multiple strands of our identities collided with institutional cultures’ (p. 804), using testimonio – testimonial narratives – to retell their educational journeys. Writing that describes how the ‘dominant discourses of higher education’ (p. 806) are challenged by doctoral researchers is, in my experience, rare, especially when it is written in this style of testimonio and from their perspectives. Yet the autoethnographic writing of others, such as this, can help me/us to reflect on the ways in which ‘I/we’ continue to perpetuate ‘notions of individualism and male supremacist ideas in spaces of learning’ (Burciaga & Tavares, 2006, p. 140, cited in Espino et al, 2010, p. 805), albeit unintentionally. These doctoral researchers describe how they found support outside of their academic departments yet, in doing so, muse on whether this excuses those departments from working towards creating more inclusive environments (p. 814). Their claim that their ideas are pushed aside or silenced by academics, rather than being explored together, validated and acknowledged is one that troubles me. Do I too collude in such behaviours? I think and hope not, as I trust is attested to by the earlier story of my relationship with Sika. But how do we enable students and doctoral researchers to speak aloud what they may be feeling, but that often remains unspoken? How do we get beyond the surface of apparent politeness and celebration of diversity so that students in higher education feel able to confront their differences, express their fears without, as Fanghanel and Cousin (2011) suggest, inflating differences? Maybe it’s time for another story.

In Which I Remember Nora

Nora was a doctoral researcher from Malaysia. Her background as a researcher was a positivist, quantitative one, and, when she encountered qualitative research and subsequently narrative inquiry as part of her doctoral research training programme, she was entranced by it. As our supervisory relationship developed, she shared with me the significance of her Islamic faith and the important role that it played in her life. Yet, in her writing, she never referred to it. My understanding of Islam was sufficiently developed to be able to discern distinct contradictions between the philosophical ideas to which she was drawn, such as postmodernism and post-structuralism, and the tenets of her faith. How could she reconcile her deeply held values and beliefs with these philosophical concepts? I found myself encouraging her to explore what appeared to me to be a predicament in her writing. Her research was developing into a study that was creative and original. I felt that, were she to be transparent in grappling with what I perceived to be tensions and contradictions, such an approach would give her work an intellectual ‘edge’, as I was not aware of very much similar research. And so she began to write about her beliefs and values as a Malaysian, Muslim, female academic and to give me her writing, as usual, to read and comment on. Reading it, I was very uncomfortable. Many of her beliefs and values were so different from mine that, much as I wanted to respect her right to hold them, I found it hard to understand how she could do so. I shared this discomfort with her and in our next meeting we talked about our differences, encouraging each other to articulate where and why we saw our worlds differently. At the end of that conversation, neither of us had altered our views, but our relationship had changed. It had deepened into one that was much more collegial and one that enabled both of us to

challenge and question the other to explain her position. Through this process, I found the postcolonial concept of 'unhomeliness' that I had encountered in Catherine Manathunga's (2007) work helpful. 'Unhomeliness' to me is a clumsy word, yet its definition described eloquently the process that I was experiencing. That of bumping up against ideas that were so alien to my own that I wanted to reject them, I, who considered myself as celebratory of diversity. By remaining with the discomfort and using the opportunity to dialogue about why we held such beliefs, Nora and I were both able to reach a different place, one that recognised the value of that dialogue in enabling us to move beyond what can be 'contrived versions of commonality' (Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 102) to 'finding points of alignment and orientation between us' by talking about the apparent dislocations and differences. What is more, Nora was able to articulate these tensions and apparent paradoxes in her final doctoral dissertation adding this critique to enrich her work so that it was challenging and original.

More on Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

I indicated earlier that it was the interactions with postgraduates from different contexts that started me on the journey of wanting to investigate 'the explanations from the experiences of students' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 28) of learning and teaching. Forrest et al (2012) in writing about their use of autoethnography to challenge what they construe as a traditional, instructional role comment that, 'It is always easier to observe the framework within which someone else's thoughts, feelings and behaviors are embedded, rather than to see, much less challenge one's own' (p. 1). In some senses I disagree, but the story that I have just told about an aspect of my relationship with Nora, offers, perhaps, an example of their observation. I found it easier to be sceptical about the framework within which her values and beliefs were embedded than to really challenge my own. Appreciating that our identities as learners are as shifting and changing as any other identities (Sarup, 1996; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Fox, 2006), and that cultural differences can be destabilised (Gannon, 2009), I was able to use my own discomfort to develop new learning (Manathunga, 2007) and our apparent differences were 'destabilised'.

'Who shapes the culture of learning and intellectual HE spaces?' (Turner & Robson, 2008, p. 11). If teachers are significant in 'mediating knowledge, values and behaviours' (p. 83) then problematising not only pedagogical practices, but the philosophical concepts that inform them is crucial in our international higher education environments (Trahar, 2007, 2010; Hellsten, 2008). Learning, teaching and assessment are practices that, like any other, are constructed and mediated by cultural norms and academic traditions. The positioning of the learner as autonomous pervades higher education discourse in the UK – and in many other 'Western' contexts. But this perspective draws from philosophies that privilege individual development:

In the traditional university disciplines, the ways of thinking are derived, historically, from the underlying philosophy of the Western world, involving causal explanations and critical reasoning, which can then be alien to students coming from very different cultural backgrounds ... there needs to be a greater awareness of the ways in which thinking and acting that are found in other cultures and the implications these have for university teaching. (Entwistle, 2009, p. 23)

Entwistle, (p. 78) continues to recommend that teaching be designed to be 'multipli-inclusive'. Such words reflect my conversation at the beginning of this article, where I was musing on my exhortations to the student to ground his assertions in relevant, supporting literature, reflecting on my clumsy attempts to be 'multipli-inclusive'. Interrogating my own beliefs and values in the ways described continue to help me to understand 'the impact of our positioning as teachers and learners with different linguistic, cultural, disciplinary and experiential knowledge, and on our sense of ourselves in relation to others as writers, knowers, professionals' (Ryan & Viète, 2009, p. 305).

Conclusion: a temporary stopping place

The process of writing this article in order to explain the potential of autoethnography for higher education research has helped me to think once again about learning and teaching, not only the theories and ideas that have influenced me in the past, but also to current examples where I may still be behaving in ethnocentric ways, even though I may not intend to do so.

In this way we may also reclaim some of the 'forgotten things' of the university – moments when thinking enters the room, moments of generative silence, moments of imagination and action. (Scott & Hobson, 2013, p. 27).

My claim is that, in our multicultural European higher education contexts, autoethnography, as a methodological approach, has a place in enabling us, as practitioners and as researchers, to recognise and work with the emotional aspects of our experiences to understand and theorise them. In such a way, we can perhaps reclaim some of those thinking moments, imaginative moments that move us to action. They can be forgotten yet these moments are crucial in understanding and celebrating the diverse and complex environments within which we operate.

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