

Always a Story

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I think it was the rain that woke me. I could suddenly hear it on the skylight and the roof just above my head, blowing in off the English Channel onto the Sussex coast on this morning in March as the dawn began to break. Then again, I had been waking early with something on my mind for a while now: half-formed sentences about autobiography; ideas about memory and references to narrative; shelves and libraries full of books unread by me that made my heart speed up as I struggled to get a grip on writing the chapter before the deadline. Dry in the mouth and out of my depth again.

I knew straight away that something had changed. The rain had come and I had let go of something and found a way forward. It was a story. Of course it was a story. It was always a story.

This is a story of understanding autoethnography as the enactment of narrative inquiry, learning and pedagogy.

I want the story to be about:

- autoethnography as narrative research;
- autobiographical memory as a form of narrative construction;
- how these can inform narrative learning
- the implications of this in developing narrative pedagogy

The importance and significance of learning through the reflexive articulation of personal experience is the theme that unites the sections that follow. I draw upon a number of narratives from my own research, learning and teaching to illustrate the discussion. Learning from experience about ourselves, others and the cultures that we live and work within is also the theme that unites the various ways in which I now interact with other teachers and students of education.

Autoethnography as narrative research

I begin by briefly tracing some of the antecedents and characteristics of autoethnography before considering it as narrative research in the context of education. The criteria for separating one category of autobiographical discourse from another are no more clear-cut than when Harold Rosen, while attempting to gather written autobiographical acts into a number of categories such as memoir, journals, autobiography and professional testimony, pointed out that the discursive practices of writing about the self may overlap at the turn of every page and are themselves part of social cultural history. They cannot be fixed in definition or meaning:

At the very moment when they are being described they are changing; some forms are dying out and new ones are coming into being. Any taxonomy of this kind should be partly obsolescent (Rosen, 1998, p.20).

The astounding proliferation of autobiographical methods since then, which Denzin (2014) considers as interpretive autoethnography, would now make such categorisation less-feasible still. The myriad forms of autoethnography all draw upon 'life narrative' which Smith and Watson (2001) frame as a term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing. The autobiographical components of life narrative include memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency: 'Life narrative, then might best be approached as a moving target, a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present' (ibid, p3).

As Folkenflik (1993) notes, the act of 'self-life writing' long-predates the term 'autobiography,' that is often attributed to Southey in the first decade of the 19th Century. The term 'autobiographical narrative' appears in the preface of the working class poet Ann Yearsley's *Poems* of 1786. Anderson (2001) critiques key texts which constitute a kind of autobiographical cannon sitting at the heart of the dominant tradition of autobiographical writing described as both drawing upon and helping to construct 'a history of selfhood, a paradigmatic narrative through which the subject has learned to know who s/he is' (p.19). In the context of this tradition Augustine's *Confessions* (c.AD 398-400) is seen as a brilliantly successful historical landmark and the keystone of western autobiographical writing. Gusdorf (1956) suggests that autobiography 'asserts itself only in recent centuries and only in a small part of the map of the world . . . the late product of a specific civilization' (p.29-31). While Verene (1991) argues the case for the works of Vico (1688 -1744), most critics consider Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781) as the parent text of modern autobiography. We need to note that autobiographical discourse has a history extending back to antiquity and beyond western culture. The oral performance of self-narrative predates literacy in, for example, Native American cultures through song and African oral histories of descent. As argued by Smith and Watson (2001) the importance of self-representation in preliterate and literate non-Western cultures challenges a range of assumptions that frame 'autobiography' as a unique achievement of 'Western culture at a moment of individuation in the wake of the Enlightenment' (p84).

The male, essentialist and romantic notion of self-hood that runs through Rousseau's *Confessions* permeates the ensuing tradition of auto/biographies of 'great men' established throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. In the late 20th century, this cannon of autobiography became a focus of poststructuralist and feminist critiques that reframed self and self-representation as historically, socially and culturally constructed (Barthes, 1977; Lejeune, 1989; Miller, 1991; Stanley, 1992; Marcus, 1994). As conventions were rejected within poststructural analysis, so the form was reconfigured by acknowledging and absorbing self-critique and reflexivity (e.g. Barthes. 1977). Less burdened by the ego of the self (Stanley, 1992) multiple selves could be acknowledged and 'performed' through interpretive interactionism and interpretive autoethnography (Denzin, 2001, 2003, 2014). Bourdieu (1986) extends the reconfiguration through the notion of 'biographical illusion' where any coherent narrative is seen to be structured by the culture which makes both individual and text. While acknowledging the centrality of culture, Denzin sees Bourdieu's general structural position as a gloss on the complexities of the process:

The point to make is not whether biographical coherence is an illusion or a reality. Rather, what must be established is how individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies. The sources of this coherence, the narratives that lie behind them, and the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered (Denzin, 2014, p.44).

Bruner argues that even if we want to, we cannot reflect upon the self without some sort of accompanying reflection upon the nature of the world in which we exist. In recognising that the self must be 'treated as a construction that, so to speak, proceeds from the outside in as from the inside out, from culture to mind as well as from mind to culture', Bruner (1990, p108) draws attention to an autobiographical process that allows one to consider the reflexive nature of the story and one's own capacity and limitations in turning round on the past and altering the present in what Gergen (1973) described as the 'dazzling' human capacity to imagine alternatives.

While the 'intimate and inextricable' link between autobiographical memory, culture and identity (Goodson, 2014) has long been recognized it remained on the edge of social science until the 1980s. The 'narrative turn' encouraged inquiry that foregrounded, valued and celebrated autobiographical memory as a site of construction and reflexivity. Auto/biographical, life-history and narrative methodologies moved from the margins to become established, although not unchallenged, within sociological and educational research. In education, pioneering studies with teachers in various contexts by for example Ball and Goodson (1985), Woods (1987), Elbaz (1990), Huberman (1993) and Erben (1998) form a rigorous and widely-respected foundation in demonstrating the valuable insights that are gained into teachers, students, schools and pedagogy through the examination of participants' life-histories. An example of this in the study of education and elsewhere is autoethnography, defined by Ellis and Bochner in 2000 as:

. . . an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal and the cultural (p739)

One of the fundamental elements of autoethnographic research is the recognition of how self-narrative is constructed, changed and developed in relation to grand, group and individual narratives. Hayano (1979), used the term 'autoethnography', to refer to the work of 'insider' anthropologists, researching their 'own people' (p101) arguing that in a post- colonial era ethnographers need to study their own social worlds and sub-cultures. It has evolved and widened from there to include a sometimes bewildering rubric of research approaches, methods and techniques such as 'narratives of the self' (Richardson, 1994), 'first person accounts' (Ellis, 1998), 'reflective ethnographies' (Ellis and Bochner 1996), 'evocative narratives' (Tillman-Healy 1999), 'collaborative autobiography' (Goldman, 1993) 'collaborative autoethnography' (Change, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013), 'analytic autoethnography' (Anderson, 2006), 'ethnodrama' (Saldana, 2011) 'autoethnodrama' (Moriarty, 2014), to name only a few (see Holman Jones et al, 2013, and Denzin, 2014). Within all of these approaches the researcher is deeply self-identified through explicit and reflexive self-observation. One of the central cornerstones of autoethnography is that the narrative places the self within a social context.

I came to autoethnography in my doctoral study of teacher education as I sought to examine and construct my own story towards and within teacher education in collaboration with and reference to others. I also wanted to attempt to introduce more reciprocity within the process of the research itself. As the study developed and I continued to examine the various tributaries which feed into the autoethnographic stream, I was drawn towards analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006, Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013) as a framework within which to examine and present my research for a thesis.

In her preface to the *Handbook of Autoethnography* Carolyn Ellis (2013) illustrates how she and other autoethnographers have moved from defending autoethnography as a method of enquiry to witnessing its explosion in applied research across a range of disciplines all over the world. Methodological definitions can be difficult when boundaries are intentionally crossed, blurred or erased:

The goal always is to create the conditions for a critical consciousness, one that imagines a radical politics of possibility. Autoethnography inserted itself in the picture when it was understood that all ethnographers reflectively (or unreflectively) write themselves into their ethnographies (Denzin, 2014, p.26)

Methodological openness is one of the virtues for those drawn to autoethnography which is seen as:

. . . a fresh and innovative variation of ethnography – and more – where an ethnographic perspective and analysis are brought to bear on our personal, lived experience, directly linking the micro level with the macro cultural and structural levels in exciting ways (Allen-Collinson, 2013, p.282),

This presents a challenge for those who wish to define, evaluate or apply the methods in research. As Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) make clear, autoethnographic texts do not often conform to established structures in sharing extended 'methods' sections. The goal is not to justify or defend methodological criteria but to 'reveal the self as a central character with rich emotional evocation that serves to ground the story being told' (ibid p.64). Anderson and Glass-Coffin address this lack of methodological clarity citing the often eclectic and various mixture of methods drawn up by the autoethnographic bricoleur (2013, p.64). While resisting orthodoxies old or new is part of the project, some commonalities can be identified: Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis conceptualise autoethnography as the use of personal experience and personal writing to (1) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practices; (2) make contributions to existing research; (3) embrace vulnerability with purpose; and (4) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response (2013, p.p22-25).

Autoethnography: an example of autobiographical memory as a site of narrative construction

As autoethnography has blossomed in a range of hues and styles it joins a stream of work that recognises and examines the potential of autobiographical memory as a site of narrative construction. The stream sprang from the

'turns' in understanding of human inquiry driven by recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge; related critiques of objectivity; the emerging appreciation for personal narrative and story, and concerns about the ethics and politics of research practice and representations. A wave of scholarship and research on memory has reconsidered and reframed personal memory, not as a passive, descriptive and retrospective activity, but as active, constructive and contingent (e.g. Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 1997; McAdams et al, 1997; Pillemar, 1998; Thome, 2000; Goodson, 2006; Goodson and Gill, 2014). Though various and different in many ways, in common:

This work stresses how autobiographical memory helps to define and locate our narratives of selfhood within a continuing and coherent life-story. There the memory works in a more improvisational, constructional and creative manner (Goodson, 2014, p.124).

While questioning and reconfiguring the notion of coherence, autoethnography is also an example of this type of memory work in action. Here the researcher performs the roles of both participant and researcher, stepping 'in and out' of the story as much as this can be reflexively achieved. In this respect autoethnography becomes, as Reed-Danahay puts it, 'both method and text' (1997, p.6), where autobiographical memory provides the lens for an examination and reframing of understanding of the self and the cultural, past, present and future. If, as Goodson suggests, autobiographical memory is a 'lynchpin for human action and agency' (2014, p.125), then the process of autoethnography, which seeks to examine personal identity and culture through self-narrative inquiry, can be seen as a central example of autobiographical memory working as a tool for the illumination, dis-embedding and reframing of personal memory and meaning. Autoethnography allows the researcher to engage in a form of knowledge production and learning through a conscious examination of autobiographical memory, that further allows them to 'dis-embed' their understanding of the world. Seen in this way, autoethnography is a key area for the reflexive process of conscious 'detaching and distancing' (Kegan, 1982) that provides space for the work of reconstruction and repositioning of narrative knowledge and understanding of the self. Giddens describes this 'corrective intervention' of existing self-narrative, as a way to transcend the 'thrall of the past' through opening up new ways in which one can develop (1991, p.72). As Goodson says, such reflexive autobiographical memory work is especially important in exploring the learning and pedagogic capacities of narrative with significant implications for those involved in teaching and learning (2014, pp. 125-128).

I want to consider how autoethnography can provide the space, conditions and opportunity for autobiographical memory to act as a site of narrative construction and I need to note that, while I am convinced of the veracity of the process myself I do not see shining the light of reflexivity upon one's own life-story as the *only* way of learning. Furthermore, I recognise and largely follow the poststructural approach that de-constructs the researcher as subject in order to, as Jackson and Mazzei (2008) put it, 'confront the limits of a reliance on experience and narrative voice' (p. 300). Work by, (for example) Scott, (1992), MacClure (2011) and Denzin (2014) provides a caveat by questioning an exclusive reliance on voice, presence and experience that can claim an unproblematic window to the past. Deconstructive autoethnography brings this issue to the fore in 'de-centering' what Denzin (2014) describes as the

'knowing I'. A deconstructive reading of the 'knowing I' in autoethnography 'challenges the writers voice, unsettles the concept of past experiences as a site of subjectivity, and opens the door for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard and performed and seen' (ibid, p.38). With Stake (1994, p.240) I recognise the 'naturalistic generalisation' within this sort of inquiry where the narration evokes a feeling that experience is authentic and believable, bringing as, Raymond Carver (Carver et al, 1990, p.52) put it, 'news of one world to another.'

Ronald Fraser provides an example of narrative construction developed from autobiographical memory in his book *In Search of a Past* (1984), where he manages to combine his own recollections with the testimony and collected interviews of many others who knew him as a child to produce a many-voiced autobiography as a way of becoming the historian of his own past while gaining insight to his present self. Drawing upon sometimes competing methods of constructing past and self through oral history and psychoanalysis, Fraser weaves a series of encounters together to create a fragmented, reflective, reflexive narrative where no simple unified self emerges. Contradictory meanings are not resolved as Fraser acknowledges that: 'the difficulty of writing about the past . . . is part and parcel of the past' (p104) and that the past is a collective as well as an individual experience.

I have always been interested in stories about the past. Sudden changes and loss during my childhood and adolescence seems to have triggered a need in me to look back, to reconstruct, and to try to 'get things straight' in my head. I got to know my home town in a new way by working with local people on their own autobiographies in a community writing and publishing group. I wrote my own telling tale while working on my doctoral thesis. The aim of the research was to achieve an understanding of how the professional identity of teacher educators is both formed and represented by narratives of experience and I wanted to consider my own experience of education, as I thought it was an unusual example: I had failed spectacularly at school, I was always in trouble, permanently excluded with no qualifications and now found myself working in higher education having been a teacher after returning to study in my thirties. I think the sudden and not so sudden changes in circumstance and direction left me feeling uncertain of my own identity. I found Laurel Richardson and her work on writing as a method of enquiry waiting for me in Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and started writing about my experience of education.

As soon as I started writing my tale I realised that what really mattered here, was how I remembered and how I constructed my memories and how this narrative shaped my belief and behaviour. I began to explicitly investigate what I had known tacitly for a long time; how the story I make and remake about myself makes me who I am. Bruner (1990) identifies autobiographical narrative as the central phenomena of what he terms as cultural psychology. A particular view of the self is revealed through this window within a culture:

What all these (reflexive autobiographical) works have in common is the aim and the virtue of locating self not in the fastness of immediate private consciousness but in the cultural-historical situation as well (p.107).

I thought I knew the story well but found new understandings as I wrote it, then further understanding as I heard others respond to it through stories of their own. I found a story of myself within the stories of becoming and being teacher educators.

Narrative Learning: a collaboration that is waiting to happen

I want to use an autoethnographic example to consider the relational and contingent nature of narrative learning. Goodson et al (2010) note that the ongoing construction of our own narratives and our understanding of how we act in the world, is informed as much by the learning that happens in the act of narration as it is from considering narratives that are shared by others.

Marcus describes autobiographical discourses as collaborations that are waiting to happen (1994, pp.274-276). Each autoethnography is an invitation for the reader to examine their own memories while reading the memories of another. While the process of writing a self-narrative invokes memory and brings new understanding for the writer, it also opens this possibility for the reader. Personal identities and conceptions of our selves are developed through what Polkinghorne describes as 'narrative configuration' making our existence into a whole by understanding it as a single unfolding story: 'we are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure where they will end' (1988, p.150).

The following example illustrates the ways in which the stories that we hear and read can change the ways in which we hold, tell and retell stories about how we see ourselves, others and the way the world works.

Idiot wind, blowing through the buttons of our coats
Blowing through the letters that we wrote
Idiot wind, blowing through the dust upon our shelves
We're all idiots, babe
It's a wonder we can even feed ourselves

Dylan, 1974

In demonstrating elements of narrative research design, Tony Adams (2012) draws attention to the complexities of taken-for-granted assumptions about cultural phenomena through his autoethnographic writing of working as a volunteer at a local aquarium. Working alongside paid workers at this not-for-profit environmental educational facility, Adams thinks he gets to know a number of them quite well, noting the struggles that they often have to survive financially, often needing to work additional hours elsewhere. One day he asks a worker if she will be on duty at the aquarium during the weekend: "It depends on whether or not you're coming into work," she replies. Adams learns that the number of paid jobs at the aquarium depends upon the number of volunteers who have signed up, and that if a volunteer is scheduled to work on a certain day, paid staff are asked to stay off or sometimes sent home without pay. It becomes clear that the paid staff cannot establish a set pattern of work or develop any sort of collective bargaining position while volunteers do the work for free. In later reflection, Adams recognises that:

I learned that *my* volunteering directly influenced *others'* work schedules and pay. Although volunteering made me feel good, and the organisation profited from my presence, my free help hurt others. I came to

regard my volunteering as harmful and to resent the volunteering system the facility had established (Adams et al, 2015, p31).

Adams illustrates the way in which narrative reflection and analysis of insider experience can generate and share insight that other methods might miss or actively discourage: interviewing the paid staff about the problems that the volunteering system created for them would make their position still more vulnerable; interviewing volunteers revealed that they were unaware and often unwilling to engage with the way paid workers were affected by the programme.

Further, given the culturally exalted status of 'volunteering', many people – the volunteers *and* the workers – found it difficult to speak against the practice (Adams et al, 2015, p32).

In looking back reflexively, one of the questions Adams attempts to answer and that one that might occur to the reader is 'how do you get to be such an idiot?' By using the exact science of hindsight we might ask how Tony did not spot the situation from the start and feel that we would have seen things as they were and acted accordingly. When I read the story and the analysis in preparing this chapter I initially noted the features of autoethnography in examining the cultural phenomena through personal experience. Through sharing the subjective experience Adams comes to share something about the way the world works behind the fish tanks, which tells us something about how the world works on our side of the water. I kept myself out of these considerations until I suddenly seemed to appear in the story: not Tony Adams in Tampa but Mick Hayler in Hackbridge:

Barry had a car so he would pick me up at Preston Circus at 6am. I always tried to get out of the house without waking up the boys but sometimes they would appear, crumpled and creased and warm as fresh bread, squinting a 'good luck Daddy' kiss goodbye, and I would be off into the Brighton dawn.

Graham ran the whole thing out of Heathfield. He had worked for one of the big removal firms in the past so he had connections, and when they started using 'agency workers' he knew lots of young men looking for cash-in-hand work which they didn't want going through the books for one reason or another. I was one of those: a mature student with a wife and two children who everyone thought had lost it when he went to university in 1987. When I worked it out over 36 weeks instead of 52, the grant money was better than I was earning in the carpet warehouse. As long as I could work the holidays we would be alright. But I couldn't get the grant if I worked the holidays which is where Graham came in - taking a cut on the side of course.

The Big Removal Company, based in Hackbridge had a big job in London this Easter weekend: Elephant and Castle to Whitehall. Department of Health and Social Security led by the Right Honourable Kenneth Clarke. The irony is not diluted by the years that have passed since then.

When we got to Hackbridge the full-time Big Removal Company workers were there. They didn't like us and I didn't really know why until I read Tony Adams's story. How do you get to be such an idiot?

I was not a volunteer, but as a 'casual worker' I had a role in undermining any chance that the full-timers had of getting a better pay deal. The more of us the less of them, any trouble you could collect your cards and get down the job centre. I had been a trade union member since 1975 when I left school; I was in the National Union of Students; I marched with the striking miners in 1984 and I realise only now that I also played my small part in breaking the unions and the teetering labour movement in the neo-liberal morning in South West London. I will have to live with it now but the stain wells up. This is not how I like to see myself. One day Barry drove me away from Hackbridge and Heathfield for the last time and I got to finish my degree and get a proper job of sorts. My sons grew up and have jobs of their own, but I wonder if the lorries still run out of Hackbridge, and who is on board these days. I left them and their sons to it while I made my escape.

It took 25 years and a story from Florida before I was ready to see things this way. While one narrative may be the source of rupture in another as one person's epiphany evokes another's, the self-narrative can also be something that we hide behind. Ricoeur (1974) shows us that it is narrative that gives the events of the past a meaning they do not otherwise have. Narrative 'soothes us'. Indeed, as Joan Didion says 'we tell ourselves stories in order to live' (1979, p.11). Prompted by the narrative of Adams and from the middle of my own story I come to know and narrate something about myself, and by narrating the subjective experience I come to share something about the way the world works; then and now. This process is a type of narrative learning where my autobiographical memory is disrupted by another narrative which leads me to engage reflexively. Autobiographical memory becomes a site of narrative construction.

As I come to understand my own experience in a new, if somewhat uncomfortable way I might console myself with thoughts of subsequent trade union activism and memories of being . . . a volunteer. I was an unpaid worker at a local community writing and publishing group for 10 years, working alongside a part-time paid worker, helping local people to write their autobiographies, publishing on small press and selling the books locally. I am much more comfortable with this self-narrative and proud of the work we did there, but I now have to follow my narration, prompted by Adams, to consider how the roles I took there might have affected others. I benefitted from the experience in so many ways and made an important contribution, but I now wonder if the group would have had more funding if so many people had not been willing to work for nothing. My intention is not to denigrate the volunteer or the important activism that contributes so much in society, but to recognise the importance of context. I respond to Adams who draws attention to the complexities of taken-for-granted assumptions by considering the complexities of taken-for-granted assumptions in my own life.

Considering Adams's story and my own brings me to reflect in a new way upon connected cultural phenomena, and in particular the direction of government education policy in England since 2010. The expanding development of free schools and academies with the incorporation of unpaid student/teachers, unqualified teachers, and unpaid internship as an increasingly-required route into many professions, indicates that education is a critical site of imposed, implemented ideology where taken-for-granted assumptions need to be examined, questioned and challenged. We need to pay attention and look closely at what is happening. In paying attention we need to look at

ourselves as well as the actions and motivations of others. I find myself positioned uncomfortably as the institution I work for pursues strategies that bring much of this policy into practice. I realise that people who work in universities, people who teach teachers, are caught within the contradictions of capitalism as a way of life every bit as much as I was on my way to Hackbridge. Autoethnography that closely considers the relationships between life, narrative and learning can make a contribution in helping us to see what is going on and what we might make of it.

Autoethnography as an example of narrative pedagogy

In this final section of the chapter I consider an example of how autoethnography can inform a critical pedagogy that encourages and facilitates the type of narrative learning discussed previously. Alexander (2013) outlines a philosophy of autoethnographic pedagogy through his own example of teaching that draws upon Denzin's notion of 'critical performance pedagogy' (2003). This has the specific aim of encouraging reflexivity where ones 'sense of comfort in knowing the world is laid bare and vulnerable', providing possibilities for seeing the world differently (Alexander, 2013 p.543). While my own example focuses on autoethnographic writing in the study of education, rather than physical performance, many of the elements explored and explained by Alexander contribute to the pedagogy of the 'Reframing Identity' module that I work on with final year undergraduate students taking an education honours degree in England.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) envision a 'border pedagogy' that provides opportunities for students to critically examine and articulate often conflicting experiences in the spaces between culture, school and home. Border pedagogy allows students to:

. . . engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages. This means educating the students to read codes critically, to learn the limits of such codes, including ones they use to construct their own narratives and histories (pp.118-119).

Such pedagogical intentions link very closely to the ideas of narrative learning and the 'dis-embedding' of autobiographical memory. The boundaries between the study of education and the lived experience become permeable in this approach where identity is 'reframed' in the context of analysed and articulated personal experience. Autoethnographic engagement with one's own experience of education encourages an awareness of the social, cultural and political contexts where learning takes place. Central to the theme of narrative learning, Aronowitz and Giroux say that border pedagogy helps students not only to 'undo' and to critically examine their own self- narrative, but further to understand how

. . . one's class, race, gender, or ethnicity may influence, but does not irrevocably predetermine, how one takes up a particular ideology, reads a particular text, or responds to particular forms of oppression (1991, p.121).

This requires the teacher to facilitate and encourage students to safely engage in the ideological spaces of their own experiences.

Giroux (2001) argues for a public pedagogy

. . . marked by its attentiveness to the interconnections and struggles that take place over knowledge, language, spatial relations and history. Public pedagogy represents a moral and political practice rather than merely a technical procedure (p. 12).

'Learning outcomes' and 'success criteria' act as institutional control that can subdue and silence particular approaches to teaching, learning and expression in all phases of education. My own experience of trying to negotiate the gaps between narrative autoethnography and the requirements of thesis success is a typical example of the tensions that arise between traditional frameworks of assessment and approaches which foreground narrative inquiry, analysis and modes of assessment (Hayler, 2011). In negotiating my own path of enquiry and communication with a particular doctoral destination to consider, I adapted Anderson's (2006) proposals for analytic autoethnography. Although this sometimes felt like an uneasy compromise I was able to develop a version of analytic autoethnography that satisfied the examiners without surrendering my deepening commitment to an interpretive, narrative perspective with my own feelings and experiences forming a key part of the data. I demonstrated a commitment to theoretical analysis in using Sartre's (1963) progressive/regressive method of interpretation and presentation of my narrative. I learnt a lot from this process and given that the undergraduate students faced a similar challenge in balancing comparable requirements, I used this framework in designing the 'Reframing Identity' module.

The aim of the module is to support and encourage students to explore their understanding of education and to develop critical engagement with their past experience, current knowledge, and ideas for the future. Some of the students are planning to be teachers, while some aim to work in educational-related settings other than schools. They take this module in the first semester of their final year and I encourage them to draw upon their studies, placement experiences and reading from earlier in the course. The module hinges around the written assignment in which students critically reflect upon their own learning experiences in order to analyse and evaluate the educational principles and values that underpin their understanding of education. In the first sessions we focus on the nature of memory, and writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Discussion centres on 'creative analytic practice' and the crafting of story as a process of analysis. The students further reflect upon their own view of education and how this has been informed by their own experience through a writing task following each session, beginning to serially assemble a draft of the assignment.

In later sessions we consider memory in autobiography looking at life-history and narrative approaches. Discussion led by students considers the process of constructing their own stories of education. As part of the process I share some of my own experiences of education. Students working in small groups prepare and share poster presentations on their understanding of the terms 'identity', 'culture' or 'narrative'. Each week we return to the serial assignment and discuss how they are approaching their writing, what they are learning as they write, and what they will do next:

- What is your writing 'about'?

- Step back and consider the key themes that are emerging as you write – any surprises?
- Why have you identified these as key moments?
- What were the consequences of these moments/decisions?
- What are you learning about yourself as you write these tasks – is this research?
- What does it tell you about that time and your sub-culture?

From Week 6 we begin to work in smaller groups and consider ways of making sense of stories from experience. I introduce them to the progressive/regressive approach (Sartre, 1963; Denzin, 2001) as a way of considering their data. The concept of the individual, defined as a praxis that both produces and is produced by social structures (Sartre, 1982) forms the basis of the progressive/regressive method as it combines psychological and sociological explanations of human action. Here narrative is located in a particular historical situation. Sartre (1963) structured an analysis that first looks forward from a particular point towards a conclusion of sorts as well as back to the historical, cultural and biographical conditions that moved the narrator. This situates the memory and interpretation of actions in time and space, illuminating the uniqueness of the individual while revealing commonalities of the sub-culture. In practice the students consider and develop their own texts assembled over six weeks and follow this process based on the progressive/regressive approach:

- 1) Make a time line of the period you have written about in your own learning story
- 2) Mark the most significant moments (critical incidents, turning-point events, eras)
- 3) Choose one such moment then 'jump' forward to now – note consequences of that, moment, incident, event. How did it change things?
- 4) Widen the context: personal - Go back to that moment on the time line to consider your life beyond the circumstances of the incident. What was happening in your life at that point? Where did you live? What were you like? How do you know?
- 5) Move forward to now: What were the consequences of the things you have noted in the wider personal context? How did they work out?
- 6) Back to that point/moment on the timeline: Widen the context - education at that time. What do you remember about school and education at that time? Do you need to find out more to develop your understanding of this context?
- 7) Education now: What are the current consequences of the way education was at that point? What is the same, what is different? Policy, ideas etc.
- 8) Back to that point on the timeline: Widen the context - Politics. What was going on in the UK politically at that point? What do you know about this? How could you find out more?
- 9) Politics now: What are the current consequences of the political context at that point? What is the same, what is different? Policy, ideas etc.

While I acknowledge that this simplifies and reduces Sartre's progressive/regressive model to a somewhat mechanistic level, the results have been sometimes astounding with students writing autoethnographic assignments that bring new understanding of their own experience to bear on new understanding about the development and nature of education in England.

Hannah began with a memory of being withdrawn from class as she was struggling with her reading when she was eight:

My heart would sink when Mrs. Jones came to collect us. She was nice enough but everyone knew what it meant: 'they are the stupid group'. I remember asking mum what had made me stupid and when she said I wasn't, I said 'I must be I'm in the stupid group.'

Bringing the memory forward to meet with her knowledge of policy then and now and the pressure on class teachers at the time, Hannah considers the reasons for this approach: *I feel I was removed because I would consume too much of the class teacher's time if I was in the classroom.*

She later applies her knowledge of practice to her own example:

I know now it would have been more effective if I had been supported by a specially trained professional who understood my individual needs and could help me to be in the classroom with everyone else. This would have ensured I was getting the right support but also treating me equally by keeping me in the class.

Simon remembered being bullied at school because other boys thought he might be gay:

I was uncomfortable with who I was (possibly more so because of the bullying) and hadn't come to terms with the fact I was indeed homosexual, trying to convince myself that it was a 'phase'.

He reflects on the process of writing the assignment:

I have illuminated a number of ways in which my experience of homophobic bullying has worked towards my understanding of education. Even though there are a number of other factors that have shaped these beliefs, it is my understanding that they have had a major influence upon this. By using the progressive/regressive method, I have come to a better understanding of the contextual factors surrounding those experiences and how these factors possibly shaped my experiences within secondary school.

Encouraged by an environment that places reflexivity at the centre of a critical narrative pedagogy, from the middle of their stories, the students come to know and narrate something about themselves, and by narrating the subjective experience they come to share something about the way that education works; then and now.

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