Contemporary British Autoethnography

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This engaging, informative book makes an exciting contribution to current discussions about the challenges and uses of contemporary autoethnography. Authors from a range of disciplines ‘show and tell’ us how they have created autoethnographies, demonstrating a rich blend of theories, ethical research practices, and performances of identities and voice, linking all of those with the socio-cultural forces that impact and shape the person.

The book will be a useful resource for new and experienced researchers; academics who teach and supervise post-graduate students; and practitioners in social science who are seeking meaningful ways to conduct research. This should be required reading for all qualitative research training.

Kim Etherington PhD
Emeritus Professor, University of Bristol, UK
Contemporary British Autoethnography
The series will commission books in the broad area of professional life and work. This is a burgeoning area of study now in educational research with more and more books coming out on teachers’ lives and work, on nurses’ life and work, and on the whole interface between professional knowledge and professional lives.

The focus on life and work has been growing rapidly in the last two decades. There are a number of rationales for this. Firstly, there is a methodological impulse: many new studies are adopting a life history approach. The life history tradition aims to understand the interface between people’s life and work and to explore the historical context and the socio-political circumstances in which people’s professional life and work is located. The growth in life history studies demands a series of books which allow people to explore this methodological focus within the context of professional settings.

The second rationale for growth in this area is a huge range of restructuring initiatives taking place throughout the world. There is in fact a world movement to restructure education and health. In most forms this takes the introduction of more targets, tests and tables and increasing accountability and performativity regimes. These initiatives have been introduced at governmental level – in most cases without detailed consultation with the teaching and nursing workforces. As a result there is growing evidence of a clash between people’s professional life and work missions and the restructuring initiatives which aim to transform these missions. One way of exploring this increasingly acute clash of values is through studies of professional life and work. Hence the European Commission, for instance, have begun to commission quite large studies of professional life and work focussing on teachers
and nurses. One of these projects – the Professional Knowledge Network project has studied teachers’ and nurses’ life and work in seven countries. There will be a range of books coming out from this project and it is intended to commission the main books on nurses and on teachers for this series.

The series will begin with a number of works which aim to define and delineate the field of professional life and work. One of the first books ‘Investigating the Teacher’s Life and Work’ by Ivor Goodson will attempt to bring together the methodological and substantive approaches in one book. This is something of a ‘how to do’ book in that it looks at how such studies can be undertaken as well as what kind of generic findings might be anticipated.

Future books in the series might expect to look at either the methodological approach of studying professional life and work or provide substantive findings from research projects which aim to investigate professional life and work particularly in education and health settings.
Contemporary British Autoethnography

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Alec Grant
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East Sussex, UK
Nigel P. Short: Jonathan and Jess, Ruth and Danny
Lydia Turner: For Daniel, Jacob, Christopher, Joshua
and my little sister
Alec Grant: For Roman, wherever you may be
Nigel, Lydia and Alec: For Professor Jerome Bruner
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This book was developed over a number of conversations with many people over many years. To all of them we say thank you. As editors, we have all, inevitably, had very different autoethnographic experiences of autoethnography. It was our unique and different positions that encouraged and prompted us to want to collect a number of chapters from different perspectives and disciplines, showing how some of the many forms and guises that constitute autoethnography can be presented.

 Appropriately, in a book about narratives and storytelling, our achievement has not been done alone. We would like to thank all the contributing authors for their generosity and enthusiasm and promptness; this has helped to make editing the book a gratifying project.

 We are indebted to Peter de Liefde and his colleagues at Sense for guidance, support help and flexibility, Professor Ivor Goodson for including this volume as part of his Studies in Professional Life and Work series, and Mike Hayler for facilitating this project through previously publishing with Sense.

 We would also like to acknowledge the ‘All together for Autoethnography’ (A4A) group at the University of Brighton. This group has provided a convivial and dialogical environment for discussions associated with Autoethnography.

 Thanks go to Josh Turner and Robin Harris for providing the book’s sleeve (JT) and back (RH) sleeve photographs and to Professor Kim Etherington for providing the book’s blurb.

 The intent of the book was to help give a voice to the voiceless, the invisible to become visible and to make differences noticeable; invisibility is, in the end, intolerable.
INTRODUCTION: STORYING LIFE AND LIVES

Rotten and rusted; a five-bar gate
Lies felled in the mud, letting the fields escape

The Present
Simon Armitage

Like much of British poetry, this book has a place: a place where numerous histories came together in one unplanned space. The three of us were sat together in the atrium of the Checkland building at the University of Brighton, having accidentally bumped into each other in the autumn of 2011. The idea of this book morphed from an initially spontaneous, then ever-developing, conversation. Similar to the casual sharing of thoughts about a recipe book, our ideas converged like the different ingredients that go to make up a new and novel dish. In the company of our invited contributing authors, this book is the resultant mix of many different autoethnographic ingredients.

Contemporary British Autoethnography considers, presents, analyses and discusses multiple autoethnographic representations, illustrating the fluid nature of identities as these move with shifting contexts. The chapters in the book display competing tensions within autoethnographic inquiry at paradigmatic, methodological and representational levels, around performance, identity and voice, in relation to the sociocultural. We hope it will also raise questions about the iconoclastic and boundary changing nature of autoethnography at all of those levels. We believe that this book contributes a necessary and timely challenge to mainstream qualitative research practices which, in our experience, can be characterised by oppressive and inflexible institutional rules, restrictions and normative assumptions.

DEFINING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The meaning, function and onto-epistemological characteristics of autoethnography have been subject to an ongoing, vigorous, and sometimes heated debate in recent years (see eg Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008, 2009; Muncey, 2010). However, at a general level, there appears to be consensus among the autoethnographic communities around acceptance of the description of the approach provided by Ellis and Bochner (2000). This is that autoethnography is a contemporary qualitative research methodology, demanding unusually rigorous, multi-layered levels of researcher reflexivity, given that the researcher/s and the researched are normally the same people.
Proceeding from the above broad description, as both a methodology and method of diverse interdisciplinary practices, autoethnography is concerned with producing creatively written, detailed, local and evocative first person accounts of the relationship between personal autobiography and culture. Accounts might be highly charged, thumping the reader firmly in the solar plexus, leaving them metaphorically gasping for breath, or they may be gentle and meandering, allowing the reader space and time for reflection.

The creativity with which autoethnographic pieces are often written, opens up a reflexive world in which the researcher/researched join with the reader to create a story. This iterative process of reflection and reflexivity within the autoethnographic process does not lend itself to linear chronological progression, specificity and concreteness; instead, the text might wander, twist and turn, changing direction unexpectedly. It might jump from one thought/feeling/memory or experience up or down or backwards, forwards or sideways to another. Fractions of an experience link to other fractions of another experience becoming ‘fletted’, with ‘no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibres…..it is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 525), lacking specificity and defined authenticity. Thus the story might change, develop and grow throughout the reader’s experience of the writing, and almost certainly changes and grows as the author authors and re-authors their writing:

These accounts represent lives that may range from being very similar to very different from the lives of others and it is in this context that the situated nature of self with others in social and cultural milieus is critically interrogated (Spry, 2001). In relation to autoethnography, a seminal but provisional definition of ‘culture’, to be unpacked, problematised and discussed further below, is the meaning construction woven in human and material contexts as people go about and through their lives (Bochner & Ellis, 1996).

In the above vein, autoethnography has been usefully defined by Ellis (2004, p. xix) as follows:

… research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. The form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection … (and) claims the conventions of literary writing.

Thus, autoethnography, an approach as close to the arts and humanities as it is to the social and human sciences, celebrates and prizes subjectivity rather than
viewing it as an irritant, and can be distinguished from biography or memoir by its commitment to rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis.

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND CONTEXTS WITHIN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In the context of the tensions within the autoethnographic community about the characteristics of the approach, several possible histories could be written about its emergence. One significant historical strand relates to critical tensions in the philosophy of science governing qualitative research: specifically, in the ongoing postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of the knowledge claims, representational practices and effective dissemination of traditional qualitative approaches. This critique initially emerged in the late twentieth century, and is associated with two inter-related onto-epistemological phenomena: the so-called ‘triple crisis’ and the ‘narrative turn’ in human and social science inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995; Spry, 2001).

The triple crisis – of representation, legitimation and authority (Holman Jones, 2005) – signifies scepticism toward positivist-informed ‘master’ or ‘grand’ narratives, which claim objectivity, authority and researcher neutrality in the study of social and cultural life. In this context, the representational practices associated with positivist science have been subject to challenge. This critique has extended to a rejection of the assumed ubiquity of stable meanings, existing independently of culture, social context and researcher activity and interpretation.

In related terms, the narrative turn in the human and social sciences has triggered a shift from a single, monolithic conception of what should constitute scholarly work in favour of a developing pluralism. Paving the way for autoethnography among other contemporary qualitative methodologies, this pluralistic agenda has resulted in the recognition and promotion of multiple forms of experience in diverse research and representational practices. Included and celebrated among these are local, short stories (for example, Bochner, 2001; Grant & Zeeman, 2012; Reissman, 1993, 2008); indeed many autoethnographic writers consider local narratives essential in balancing, and destabilising the exclusivity of grand narrative accounts.

This has impacted on a corresponding emergent shift in autoethnographic researcher value position, where the privileging of the distanced spectator and writer of essays is rejected in favour of the embodied, feeling, culturally engaged and vulnerable observer and teller of creative, evocative stories (Bochner, 2001). In this context, the function and purpose of human and social science texts also changes. With regard to the relationship between the writers and readers of autoethnography, disinterested, ‘objective’ instruction gives way to evocative, emotionally-resonant connection.

In summary, in the context of the above sustained intellectual context, critique and practices, the interdisciplinary genre of autoethnography, as both methodology and method, has developed as a radical alternative to conventional, realist social science practices and writing. Significantly, researchers within the burgeoning
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Autoethnographic movement have eschewed the assumptions and practices of traditional qualitative approaches, including the privileging of researcher over the subject, an over-concern with method at the expense of story, and pre-occupations with outmoded conceptions of validity, truth, and generalizability (Denzin, 1992; Spry, 2001). Thus, grand theorising, the façade of objectivity, the decontextualising of research participant and the search for single truths are all rejected. This allows for the emergence of new forms of subjectivist writing, which focus on the local and the particular, and which synthesise autobiography with cultural critique, utilising creative written and analytical practices, including literary tropes (Ellis, 2004; Grant, 2010a; Richardson, 2000; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). Autoethnographic work thus emerges as an ideal way of creatively celebrating the locally and temporally situated nature of identity, fieldwork and cultural interpretation and analysis (Holman Jones, 2005; Jones, 1996; Spry, 2001).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

An important implication emerging from the above is that cultural interrogation constitutes the exploration of multiple ways of experiencing and representing lives. In this regard, autoethnography actively promotes political inquiry (Denzin, 2006; Ellingson, 2006; Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Lincoln, Morse, Pelias & Richardson, 2008; Spry, 2001), related ethical dilemmas (Berger, 2001; Ellis, 2007; Rambo, 2007), and the experiences of people who feel they have been culturally excluded and marginalised (Short & Grant, 2009; Short, 2010).

Writing about how identities are compromised by dominant cultural meanings, at odds with subjective and relational experiences of the world, gives the lie to the often taken for granted master narratives about how life is or is supposed to be. Autoethnography, therefore, often explicitly challenges the exclusivity of supposedly value-neutral, rationally-based categorical thinking and abstracted theory in explicitly celebrating emotionality, political standpoint position and social activism. Many autoethnographers, explicitly and implicitly, do this in pursuit of a social justice agenda, aiming for the reduction of the oppression of individuals and groups within broader socio-political structures (Fine & Weis, 2005). The aim of this pursuit is to positively impact on and change the world, in line with an aspirational utopian ideal (Holman Jones, 2005).

THE POLITICS OF SUBJECTIVISM

In this context, subjectivism is welcomed and seen as a resource (McLeod, 2011), as the body is assumed to be a central site for socio-political meaning making (Spry, 2011). However, as Sparkes (2003) robustly argues, subjectivism should not be confused with solipsism or self-indulgence. The subjectivist stance in autoethnography is predicated on quite the opposite: that culture flows through self and vice versa (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), and that people are inscribed within
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dialogic, socially shared, linguistic and representational practices (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2005) through their daily occupations. The self is therefore understood as a social and relational rather than an autonomous phenomenon (Church, 1995). Although this position undoubtedly provokes turf wars about the proper focus of the social and human sciences and polarises positions within these areas, these are perhaps irresolvable issues which amount to ‘difference(s) to be lived with’ (Rorty, 1982, p. 197).

FUNCTIONS

Given the argument so far, writing autoethnography demands high, rigorous, courageous and challenging levels of personal, relational, cultural, theoretical and political reflexivity. Pillow (2003) describes this in terms of uncomfortable reflexive practices, within which autoethnographic researchers critically explore and interrogate the sociocultural forces and discursive practices that have shaped and influenced their emerging subjectivities. This provides unique opportunities for authors to reflect on what they bring to their different forms of autoethnographic inquiry. Not surprisingly, such reflexive work often results in and characterises autoethnography as social and cultural critique, experienced and perceived as social transgression (Park-Fuller, 2000). In this context, an important function of autoethnography is to expose ‘the elephants in the room’ of cultural context: social and organisational practices which beg robust scrutiny and critique but which are taken for granted as unquestioned, normative ‘business as usual’. Thus, the autoethnographer fulfils the dual role of cultural trickster (McLeod, 2011) and cultural conscience agent (Grant, 2010a; Short, Grant & Clarke, 2007).

At this point, it may be useful to develop and problematize the discussion around the nature of autoethnographic ‘culture’ from the straightforward Bochner and Ellis (1996) definition described earlier. The description by these seminal autoethnographic authors of culture as straightforward social meaning construction may lend itself to a normative reading of culture as a kind of folksy form of liberal participation. This reading suggests people endlessly, uncomplainingly and uncomplicatedly assimilated in the stitching together of the quilt of life, or at least with complaints that can be documented in such a way that does little to explicitly contest the pre-determined shape, texture, pattern and purpose of the quilt. Reflecting an ideology of hegemonic cultural practice, the smooth operation and management of social, political and organisational structures is thus left minimally challenged or disturbed. This is played out in the politics of autoethnographic representational practices, with normative cultural assumptions arguably frequently forming the framing backdrop in autoethnographies which tend towards the tradition of conventional qualitative inquiry and voice, to be discussed in greater depth below.

In contrast, those in the autoethnographic communities who embrace more of a critical and poststructural edge to their work might regard such representational practices as anathema to trenchant and reflexive cultural interrogation. Textual
practices which expose oppressive, deadening and creativity-stifling societal practices and experiences are key in challenging cultural hegemony.

To this end, as will also be argued further below, the use of fictional and other devices can be employed to trouble the assumptions of conventional autoethnographic voice. One such device, arguably useful for critical autoethnographic work, is satire. Used effectively in epochs from ancient to modern, including by such notable figures as Aristophanes, Jonathan Swift and Joseph Heller, satire involves the strategic use of humour to exaggerate and lampoon the paradoxes, contradictions and flaws inscribed within established cultural practices in order to expose their absurdities and oppressive social consequences. An illustrative example of the use of satirical strategies in this volume is provided by Alec Grant, in an autoethnography that critically interrogates the neoliberal cultural ‘partnership’ between higher education and mental health services.

This example suggests that satire has a logical functional place in those autoethnographies aspiring to a social justice agenda. The attempt to raise awareness of cultural contradictions and their insidious consequences can stimulate connection among developing communities of writers and readers. In terms of utopian, aspirational and social emancipation politics, such a connection may contribute to a weakening of cultural hegemony and the gradual emergence of new storied communities.

The use of satire and other textual practices in the service of cultural critique points to the contingent nature of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’. This signals a further significant function of autoethnography, which is to challenge, deconstruct, and expose as socially constructed rather than foundational or essential, binaries such as: self/other, inner/outer, public/private, individual/society (Sparkes, 2002). The issue of the deconstruction of self/other binaries links to a significant dimension of autoethnographic representational practices. Arguably, qualitative researchers have for too long frequently neglected the first-hand knowledge that they alone possess in the execution of their research ventures (Riemer, 1977). Autoethnographers are, by definition, exemplars of the research and professional ethic of engaging with and reporting on something first hand rather than vicariously. In this regard, they undermine the potentially benevolent stigmatizing and othering, colonialist research that can inform normative ethnographic practices (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). However, the politics of representation is shot through with philosophical problems around voice, signifying a relatively new and major poststructural challenge to autoethnographic writing.

VOICE

In conventional approaches to qualitative research generally and some variants of autoethnography specifically, it is often implicitly assumed that the voices of participants and researchers authentically and directly correspond to their narrative identities. Associated with this assumption is a tacit acceptance of the ‘metaphysics
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of presence': a self-knowing subject is pre-supposed who can speak for her/himself and others (Denzin, 1989; Lather, 2009). The well-intentioned task in conventional approaches is thus to facilitate the production and dissemination of this authentic voice (Lather, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009; MacLure, 2009).

The metaphysics of presence assumes real, coherent, stable individuals living lives of equivalent meaning. In line with the seminal work of Husserl, Schutz, Sartre and others, the research task related to this proposition is to access and uncover these meanings from the inner life of the person being studied via the clear window of language. This task applies whether the researcher is studying her or himself, as in autoethnography, or in more mainstream, participant-based, research approaches.

Following Derrida, the poststructural objection to the above is that the ideas of voice as a clear window into the inner life of the self (Denzin, 1989), and of self and voice as identical, are both untenable (MacLure, 2009). The argument that voice is inevitably dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002) coheres with a postmodern understanding of a cacophony of voices inhabiting and constituting a self. These voices are often contradictory, sometimes inhabiting the foreground, sometimes erased, invalidated or distorted by historical and contemporary relations of power (Chaudhry, 2009).

Given the above, voice cannot be considered an innocent and straightforward way to account for a ‘self’. Power, subjectivity and desire shape the ways in which individuals speak of their present situation and of their lives. Further, consciousness can never be fully present to itself through language (Jackson, 2009). The light of human meaning is always refracted through the dark glass of language, signs and the process of signification, and language is always unstable. Any expectation of indisputable meaning is confounded by language that is forever constituted by myriad significatory traces of words containing and referring to other words. If it is accepted that there can never be a clear unambiguous statement of anything, then all stories have the status of simply being one story in place of another (Mazzei, 2009). Written and spoken voice is thus forever condemned to insufficiency: ‘Neither can deliver the fullness and immediacy that fuels the dream of presence’ (MacLure, 2009, p. 100).

On this basis, the act of writing autoethnography influenced by poststructural sensibilities constitutes the performance of provisional ‘truths’, in textual strategies that evoke fragmented and estranged subjectivities within a temporal landscape of discontinuity and displacement (Gannon, 2006). There is nothing before or behind such language use and autoethnographic performance constitutes speaking oneself into existence within relations of power. In this context, following Deleuze, Davies (2009) argues that an individual, rather than being a self-conscious ‘I’, is a location where thoughts may emerge. The act of writing opens the writer to becoming what is not yet known and what can never be contained in words.

Writing should therefore aspire to open up other ways of knowing and seeing differently (Davies, 2009; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). However, in contrast to the kind of risk-embracing writing urged from a poststructural perspective, some
examples of autoethnography share the tendency of much mainstream qualitative research in ‘playing it safe’. The net result of this at worst is that ambiguity, complexity, power, history and specificity are erased in a literal voice which, in a research context, must respond to charges of being insular, parochial, partial and a-theoretical. This is often in spite of well intentioned attempts to produce rigorous qualitative inquiry.

Such attempts betray telling and tacitly accepted theoretical and philosophical governing principles. Despite its traditional associations with interpretivism, an unquestioned assumption of the metaphysics of presence in conventional qualitative and autoethnographic inquiry links to other paradigmatic and methodological positions, although this may not be acknowledged explicitly by researchers (Lather, 2009). These positions include modernism, realism, positivism, phenomenology, and at a broader sociocultural level liberal-humanism. The resultant product is the voice of the coherent humanistic participant or researcher, assumed to be already ‘formed’ prior to her inscription within culture, who ‘knows who she is, says what she means and means what she says’ (MacLure, 2009, p. 104). Such a conscious, stable, unified, coherent, rational, knowing and a-historic self is assumed to have a will, freedom and intentionality which is subsequently transferred through language to public action (St. Pierre, 2009). The developing and increasing accrual of experience of this self is equally assumed to provide a stable and reliable source of knowledge and knowing. In the process of knowledge production, so-called ‘lived’ experience is regarded as necessarily preceding consciousness and reflection. Next comes the writing, transmission and dissemination of such knowledge which has the self of the researcher at its heart as privileged and authentic (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008). In an attempt to both instruct, connect with and reassure readers, this product might be called the narrating voice of the predetermined I.

Narrative poststructural voice rejects the assumption of such stable identity in subjectivity in aspiring to speak from its inevitable inscription within overlapping, intersecting, and often contradictory discourses. The poststructural ‘voice’ is a constant performance of shifting, plural and often discordant combinations of discursive power and positioning (Jackson, 2009). In this context, voice is always provisional and contingent, always becoming. The task of writing research is thus more to show how subjectivity is produced rather than to display a privileged and secure, transcendent narrative identity position, confidently working in synchrony with a backdrop of unfolding history (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008). As product, this might be described as the poststructural narrating voice of the emerging ‘I’.

In contrast, textual practices in conventional qualitative and autoethnographic approaches often work with a set of much more straightforward implicit assumptions around writer and reader ethics. This is that the role of the empathic voice is to give voice to the voiceless, reflected in neat, linear and tidy narratives, which make a rhetorical appeal to readers to identify with well-rehearsed forms of suffering (Lather, 2009). Such research activity and knowledge building in and around the empathic voice is equally informed by hegemonic assumptions of universally shared
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reality positions, and can be seen in some examples of evocative and therapeutic autoethnography (eg Ellis, 2001, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Poststructuralist qualitative researchers such as Lather (2009) argue in opposition that the representation of voice should not be reassuring and should resist easy identification by acknowledging a politics of difference rather than sameness. A main reason for this argument is that associations made between empathic connection and sameness often signal colonising research tendencies. At the levels of writing and reading qualitative research, the empathic voice facilitates a kind of reassuring and voyeuristic cultural tourism while simultaneously obscuring structures of cultural discrimination and power imbalances, thus undermining the social justice agenda of contemporary qualitative research.

From this perspective, the extent to which we appear the same can erase necessary and important differences between us. Thus, empathy can function as a kind of violence – a will to absorb the other in a demand for a totality, or a ‘capture and tame’ form of conquest disguised as intimacy. On this basis, Lather (2009) argues for poststructural writing practices within which the liberal embrace of empathic understanding is rejected in favour of an ‘interpretive reticence’ towards a becoming voice – towards a voice that can never be fully known.

Such a poststructural epistemology allows for confusion, difference and saying the unsayable and uncomfortable. This can be conveyed through the use of de-authoring and decentring devices to disrupt authoritative voice and presence (St. Pierre, 2009), including the use of messy texts which undermine a clear sense of linear time (eg Grant 2010 a, b; Short, Grant & Clarke, 2007). As discussed earlier, the use of fictional devices also undermine authenticity and challenge privileged cultural voice and coherent identity positions. These further trouble any sense of a fundamental, essential, foundational position of ultimate truth beyond a narrative which has discursive rather than ontological reality (Chaudhry, 2009).

The poststructural critique of voice in conventional qualitative and autoethnographic approaches extends to an over-reliance on the rationality of words expressed through normative syntax and grammar, written or spoken. Mazzei (2009) critiques researcher investment in such a straightforward, rational, linear and coherent expression of words. Instead, she argues for a re-focus of interest in, in her terms, the impossibly full voice of boundless identity. This is expressed in cracks in meaning, and is detectable in words that shift and cavort, in subtleties of wording and expression, in indirect and oblique responses, and in communication with silences. Mazzei urges a researcher response which resists theoretical and analytical imposition and listens to voices in a way that signals the abandonment of investment in the normative voice. In her view, ‘working the limits of voice’ enables voices that would otherwise be silenced to be heard, and allows us to listen to ourselves listening and explore the politics of silence.

In related terms, MacLure (2009) calls for a privileging of the distinctive voice. This refers to properties of voice, including laughter and humour, mimicry, mockery, irony, secrecy, silences, inconsistence and masks. These are often regarded as
irritants, irrelevancies or blocks to analysis in conventional qualitative approaches. MacLure believes in contrast that they should be accorded analytic respect because of their function as strategies of resistance to the absorption of voice into the colonising normative cultural agenda of sameness, discussed above. This suggests that a kind of reverse airbrushing is called for in the process of acknowledging how voices ‘complicate their own transparency and authenticity’ (p. 109).

The problematic of voice links to questions around where and what constitutes autoethnographic data (St Pierre, 2009). Is it in the time-space of where it should be ‘officially’, for procedural ethical purposes? Or is it outside this – in informal conversations, sleep dreams or daydreams? And what is the status of the experiences supposedly captured through such data? From a poststructural position, it is not individuals who have experiences but subjects who are constituted through experience. Identity and experience simultaneously produce each other and cannot be thought about separately, or in some sort of temporal order, as in: experiencing leading to thinking leading to describing. This turns the idea of ‘lived experience’ on its head. Experience is not the origin of the explanation but that which occurs, that which we seek to describe and explain, at the point when we produce knowledge – when we do knowledge through telling, in written or spoken voice. This is made possible through available discourses that ‘systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972), and which always mediate and confound good intentions by locating voices in the shifting relations of discourse, power and desire (Jackson, 2009).

INSTITUTIONAL RESISTANCE TO AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

Of course, many of the issues, concerns, questions and controversies discussed above may well be resisted at higher education and professional practice institutional levels. Proceeding from onto-epistemological assumptions antithetical to the argument presented so far, institutional resistances relate to well-established tacitly held norms. These are both powerful and insidious, and lead to the thorough and successful socialisation of qualitative scholars and students in higher education to the importance of privileging values such as ‘rationality’ and ‘distanciation’, supposedly crucially appropriate rigour sensibilities regarded as foundational and essential rather than socially and culturally constructed and historically contingent.

These normative assumptions around what constitutes good qualitative research are shaped by a hegemonic, global, conservative research agenda (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Consequently, emotionality, subjectivity, and related structures of experience are perceived by many in higher education as anathema rather than valuable resource, and are therefore considered a threat to the integrity of their disciplines and associated scholarship (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011). Such a state of affairs amounts to a kind of professional ‘NIMBYism’ governed by implicit double standards, where research is always conducted elsewhere and with others. Conversely, considerable benefits would ensue if autoethnography was pursued as a credible and valuable
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research agenda. Arguably, academic-, discipline- and profession-based practice based on personal knowledge and experience is more credible, ethical, imbued with integrity, empathic and potentially effective. This marks the difference between implicational and propositional knowledge: between knowing, feeling, connecting and doing, from the heart, based on personal experience, rather than solely on the basis of rationally acquired information.

RISKS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

However, as a cautionary rider, in spite of its benefits and many advantages autoethnography is not for the fainthearted. The accrual of highly reflexive, culturally-related self knowledge can result in a process that is disconcerting and disturbing for the autoethnographer. This relates to the fact that undertaking and publishing autoethnography necessitates a high level of risk taking in relation to personal disclosure and reader reception. Evocative writing by no means guarantees consistent public sympathy or support, and sometimes thick skins, or their speedy growth, are helpful.

ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

This book is part of a series edited by Ivor Goodson under the banner of educational research in which the interface between professional knowledge and professional lives is interrogated. As such, the chapter authors in this book come from a diverse range of professional cultures. Within their chapters, they may or may not be speaking directly from those professional cultural backgrounds, but the contents of their chapters have a relevance to all undertaking or thinking about undertaking autoethnographic study within or outside of a professional field. Throughout the book you will find professional themes of; Sports, Mental Health, Education, Nursing/Mental Health, Psychotherapy, Tourism/Mental health, and inter-professional themes such as identity and ethics and developing as a professional. There are writings about the dissonance within and between professional and personal selves, the troubling construction of self/relational identity, journeying/travelling and looking back.

The content and themes presented within this book are nomadic. It is a deliberate intention of this collection to describe its territory as it forms and grows. Themes may be both explicit and implicit, and may appear clearly within a chapter, or may wander and fold within the narratives in a fluid non-linear fashion, felted throughout the text of many of the chapters. This book does not lend itself to linear progression. Stories told within the chapters represent fractions of experience which link to other fractions of other experiences, creating a ‘relational process ontology’ (Stenner, 2008, p.106) of ‘variously formed matters and very different dates and speeds’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987. P.4). As such, experiences of the reader may become intertwined with the reflection of those written experiences within the moment in which they come together.
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THE CHAPTERS

To get the book going, in his chapter ‘When we got to the top of Elm Grove’, Mike Hayler discusses the idea of sharing stories to develop dialogue around the professional identity of university-based teacher educators. Mike uses analytic autoethnography and narrative self-study writing as a methodological and theoretical basis for his work, alongside life history and illustrative photographs, in exploring how the professional identity of teacher-educators in higher education is both formed and represented by narratives of experience.

In the next chapter, ‘Writing teaching and survival in mental health: A discordant quintet for one’, Alec Grant writes from an explicitly poststructural theoretical position. He uses multiple, de-centred voices to represent fragmented experiences. As an academic-mental health survivor and multiple stakeholder, his work critically interrogates the master narratives informing the interface between higher education and mental health practice.

The work of David Carless explores issues around same sex attraction in sport related and cultural settings in his contribution ‘Cultural constraints: Experiencing same-sex attraction in sport and dance’. He uses storied narratives to discuss the lived experience of sexual ‘outing’ and identity in two contrasting cultures: one (arguably) heterosexual culture, traditionally binaried, exclude same sex attraction and the other a more fluid culture in which same sex attraction permeates throughout.

Jess Moriarty uses multiple voices to reflectively represent fragmented experiences around and through the process of undertaking a doctoral thesis which resists traditional academic writing. ‘Leaving the blood in: Experiences with an autoethnographic doctoral thesis’ uses analytical autoethnography together with autoethnodrama and the use of literary tropes to discuss the ways in which personal and professional life(s) are felt through and influence the autoethnographic narrative.

In ‘A truth waiting for a telling’, Kitrina Douglas writes about her experience of elite sports research in relation to her life and the demands of working within higher education. She uses messy rather than linear narratives, and literary devices to rhizomatically weave stories of her life, work and academic concerns. This provides the backdrop for her critique of grand narrative realist tales of sporting excellence defined by winning.

In the following chapter, Nigel Short discusses his experiences of tourism and travel alongside those of mental health service consumption. ‘An Englishman abroad: an autoethnographic tale’ uses narrative representation to juxtapose his identity as a tourist in a foreign country with that of being a client in an in-patient ward. Nigel moves backwards and forwards between two fixed time positions as he uses these two locations as a vehicle to discuss transforming identity.

Jonathan Wyatt pursues an inquiry into leaving his role as a counsellor, through an exploration of encounters with others in different therapy and non therapy ‘spaces’ in ‘Ash Wednesdays: An autoethnography of (not) counselling’. Using the methodological and theoretical approach of assemblage/ethnography, he stories and
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re-stories himself and his encounters with others as he moves through and away from NHS procedural bureaucracy towards becoming a non-counsellor.

In their ‘Assemblage/ethnography: troubling constructions of self in the play of materiality and representation chapter’, Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt explore the space(s) constructed within and through their collaborative writing. Jonathan and Ken use diffraction and interference to felt an assemblage in which they attempt to escape what they describe as ‘incessant nousing’ showing and sharing their ‘constructing and construction’ as they move away from categorisation through poststructural narrativisation.

In the next chapter, ‘Writing forms of fiction: Glimpses on the Essence of Self’, David Gilbourne and Phil Marshall uses three fictional stories as a medium for an informal reflective analysis of representations of selves. They explore themes of personal interactions within local geographical, sporting and academic culture(s), presenting their selves-in-fiction stories for interpretation and reflective meandering by the reader.

Continuing on the theme of identities, Nigel Short’s chapter ‘Didn’t you used to be…? The role of serendipity and sagaciousness’ provides a reflective and reflexive account of a 31-year career in the English National Health Service the end of which led to disillusionment and retirement. Nigel plays with ideas of transformational change over time, space and person reflecting on those serendipitous moments which influence transformation. He uses metaphors and reflective storying to discuss his self(s) across time and different role(s).

Following this, Brett Smith provides a critique of neo liberalism, power and hierarchy in Higher Education Institutions. In ‘Artificial persons and the academy: A story’, Brett highlights the facade of academic practice which favours the pursuit of quantitative research over education. He presents a critical dialogue which exposes the facilitated rise of the artificial person through an academic grand narrative of applied measurement and subsequent perceived lack of agency for academics.

In the next chapter, ‘Autoethnography at the will of the body: reflections on a failure to produce on time’, Andrew Sparkes seeks to generate a meta-autoethnography in which he reflects on the challenges and ethics of writing autoethnographically ‘to order’, in the production of a reflective meta autoethnographic narrative of the ‘waiting to be told’. Andrew uses an embodied woven narrative and vignettes to discuss issues of masculinity, sport, health, ageing and vulnerability.

In the last autoethnography, Lydia Turner discusses the challenges of undertaking autoethnographic study and writing in an ethical way in ‘The evocative autoethnographic I: The Relational Ethics of writing about oneself’. These challenges are illustrated in and by stories from her life as young girl and later as a grown woman. She uses evocative autoethnography, ethical theories and literary tropes to explore a partial resolution of dissonance using the idea of ‘others’ as autoethnographically constructed and therefore subject to inevitable re-authoring.

The book ends with a coda chapter, in which the three editors engage with concerns, issues and themes emerging for them from the chapters in the book.
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Their trialogue focuses on the use of autoethnography as organisational critique; the role of the approach in transcending traditional arguments and binaries around what is perceived to constitute scholarship in the social and human sciences; and the reflexive ethics of engaging with, reading and writing autoethnography.

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WHEN WE GOT TO THE TOP OF ELM GROVE

When we got to the top of Elm Grove, without saying anything and without any sort of sign, we stopped and turned together to look back at the old town where we grew up. Silently and separately we took in the familiar landmarks from our lives. The Pier and the Pavilion and the shape of the coast as it curls out towards Worthing. The various shapes of streets and buildings that we know of old: the flats in Hollingdean, the flaky facades in Roundhill, the car park near St. Barts which used to be several streets of crumbling houses when we were kids. It had taken us a while to get up here.

‘Walking really is like writing you know,’ said Suzanne. We had been talking about them both earlier in the day.

‘A sort of narrative you mean – routes as narrative?’ I said.

‘Yes, but I mean look at you and me.’ She gestured towards me, pointed her thumb at herself and then swept her hand and arm out wide to take in the view. ‘We write all the time don’t we? We walk everyday. Gets us nowhere most of the time. We don’t even call it writing and it’s not what we mean when we talk about being a writer. Reports, lesson plans, emails, mapping exercises, memos. The marks we make on a page or a screen to account for ourselves and justify our jobs.’

‘Right,’ I started to see what she meant as I noticed a new building going up near the centre of town and half-heartedly tried to remember what used to be there, ‘and we walk everyday but it’s not what we mean by being a walker? From home to work or between the office and the lecture theatre or the seminar room.’

‘Between meetings,’ she laughed.

‘Oh yes, between meetings. The walks we take to justify our lives.’

Writing, walking. They had become something more than the verbs which describe an action for us both. I love to walk, I need to write. Not the emails or the programme outline for faculty scrutiny. We are not talking about the steps we take between the places we work or the rushing around to get to the places we would rather not be.

‘So what makes the difference’, I asked Suzanne, ‘landscape? Is it where we walk? Readership? Is it why we write? Who the writing is for?’

‘Presence,’ she said, ‘presence and nourishment,’ without any hesitation.

I knew what she meant by ‘nourishment.’ There’s a writing that, grounds you, makes you bigger. It gives you as much as you put down on the page. It makes you think in a different way. And there’s a walking that does the
same: ‘When I stop I cease to think’ wrote Rouseau in 1782, ‘my mind only works with my legs’ (p. 382).

Without saying anything and without any sort of sign, we turned together away from the old town and continued walking towards a different sort of landscape.

Neither of us said anything for a couple of miles or so.

This chapter re-explores some examples of shared narratives generated through an autoethnographic research study that considered the professional identity of university-based teacher educators. The research, which emerged from my experience of working as a teacher educator in a university school of education, presented and examined my own narrative of experience alongside those of six other teacher educators.

The original study (Hayler, 2009) offered a perspective of what it means to be a teacher educator in the first decades of the 21st Century through a number of themes which arose from the writing and sharing of self-narratives and conversations. I used a range of methods drawn from narrative self-study writing, life history and autoethnography as a sort of lens with which to examine aspects of the memories, perspectives and experiences of university-based teacher educators. I eventually came to employ a form of what Anderson (2006) calls analytic autoethnography for the study and the subsequent book (Hayler, 2011).

The particular focus of the current chapter is the sharing of stories as a way of developing dialogue with informants beyond the self as part, as well as product, of the research process. I want to consider some of the ways of, and situations in which, this dialogue develops and encourage the reader to further consider how narrative is developed collaboratively in differing contexts.

I use these examples to show aspects of analytic autoethnography as a potentially useful way of framing and employing autoethnography within what Anderson (2006, p. 374) calls ‘the analytic ethnographic paradigm’. I do not see the analytic and the evocative as mutually exclusive and I think that by using this method I was able to examine some of the commonalities that arise in the experiences of teacher educators, recognising the individual nature of experience while examining and constructing my own story in collaboration with, and with reference to, others.

In a lecture which he called Seeing the Blossom, Dennis Potter once explained that:

You will have to excuse what might at first seem like self-indulgent digression but I need to make this journey to gather up a few things that I want to say. (1994, p. 41)

SATURDAY MORNING 7.08 AM, 9TH NOVEMBER 2002

Finally got to this page! Significant delay of over a week before I’ve managed to start the journal. My first lesson on the EdD in writing and preparation? . . .
WHEN WE GOT TO THE TOP OF ELM GROVE

Then a paraphrase from a famous book by Norman Maclean (1990), which I had read not long before:

Sooner or later, all things merge into one and then a river runs through it. Under the water will be the rocks. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are mine.

One thing I want from the EdD is the chance to write. Education provides a structure and a spur and an ‘excuse’. It legitimises writing for me. You wouldn’t think I’d need that by now. Perhaps it’s just a way of avoiding reading. I always wrote when I was in trouble, but now I’m not (am I?) Perhaps the EdD is a way of providing a problem – causing ‘trouble’ for myself which makes me write. Once you’ve improved upon the blank page and you make the marks which tell the tale of who you are, you’re making a sort of poetry and bringing it all together so that the water can wash over it. Then you can know yourself and be yourself. Now that I’ve started, I could write all day. But I’ve got things to do.

The aim of the research that I carried out for my thesis in 2009 was to achieve an understanding of how the professional identity of teacher educators is both formed and represented by narratives of experience. A related and equally important purpose of the study for me by then was to contribute towards professional knowledge by using, developing, examining and evaluating a method of inquiry which began from the process of writing (Richardson, 2000). I wanted to develop a research method where my own auto-biographical writing was shared and responded to by other participants as a method of exploring the ways in which professional narratives develop. I’d long given up on the idea of finding incontestable truths or making ‘accurate’ representations of memory:

There was a big board up at one end of the gallery. We made our way towards it slowly looking at the paintings on the way. I knew the locations in the paintings but I couldn’t quite place them. There were some clues like the shape of a hill but then the farm was in the wrong place; a familiar church but the wall and gate looked different from how I remembered it; the local park which looked strangely ‘other’. They were unmistakable but seemed different. The paintings captured the feeling of the locations rather than trying to recreate them exactly on the canvas. When we got to the end of the room I read the board about the artist (Harold Mockford) and his work:

(By the kind permission of Harold and Margaret Mockford)

That rang a bell with me

Drawing on Polkinghorne’s psychological research (1988), and from the philosophical ideas of Paul Ricoeur (1984), the research with teacher educators sat alongside the body of work developed by Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990, 2001) and with the Self Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) group of practitioner/writers. The focus of this group’s work has been largely upon the use
of narrative to support the education and professional development of teachers and teacher educators through reflective self-study (Russell & Munby, 1992; Russell & Loughran, 2007). While this approach could be framed as ‘activism’ (Hammersley, 2007) since it aims to change practice, I see no inevitable contradiction between the notions of self-study for research purposes and self-study for professional and
personal development. Research using S-STEP methodology has included placing teacher educators’ own narratives at the centre of the process in order to examine the role of collaboration in self-study (Chryst, Lassonde & Mckay, 2008; Crafton & Smolin, 2008) and exploring the tensions between teaching, methodology and theory in teacher education (Hamilton, 2008).

I had a particular EdD destination to consider at that time and adopted Anderson’s (2006) proposals for analytic autoethnography as a way of developing and framing my methodology in relation to more traditional ethnographic qualitative research. This sometimes felt and continues to feel, like an uneasy compromise. ‘Writers’, as Joan Didion put it, ‘are always selling someone out’ (1968, p.xiv). I had a go at developing a version of analytic autoethnography that followed Anderson’s principles without surrendering my deepening commitment to an interpretive, narrative perspective. The uneasy compromise becomes part of the story:

As the text slips away from me I read through what I’ve written again and start to think about how I would assess it and respond to it as a tutor if someone had sent it to me. Why? Is that what this is all about? Am I trying to write for an external set of standards and in a particular way? I could take the writing above and chisel and shape it and make it more and more like the chapters and the articles and the books I’ve been reading for the last year, and less and less like me. Less and less like me. Some of the books and the notes I’ve written are lying around me on the floor and on my desk. I want to breathe them all in and then breathe them out and onto the page as my own. I reach down and pick up something I copied from Maria Antoniou’s (2002) thesis a month ago:

We need to support each other in rejecting the limitations of a tradition – a manner of reading of speaking, of writing, of criticizing – which was never really designed to include us at all.’ (Rich, 1987/1981, p.95)

My scribbled note is squashed against the quote: ‘we?’ ‘us?’

Then my notes paraphrase Maria as she writes of how ‘this disturbs the myth of the objective academic’ (Antoniou, 2002, p.39) and how she took a new turn on her literature chapter from there, how she made a new approach, made a new beginning that was open about the partiality of her reading, that got down to what mattered in her thesis and stopped pretending to be ‘complete’ or ‘objective’.

I look up from my notes. Across the room I can see my reflection in the computer screen. The words I’ve typed cover my face like a mask. Less and less like me. I think I’d better take a new turn here. I may not be able to be wholly part of the ‘we’ and ‘us’ that Rich refers to and Antoniou identifies with but I don’t seem to be able to join the tradition they both reject without wearing a mask of words and I’m not sure I’ve got the skills or the motivation to make one that fits. That’s not why I’m doing this thesis. Just the opposite if I remember rightly. This is my attempt to make connections between my past and my future, to understand how identities shift and are used in belief and in practice, and to find my way back to a sense of myself.
I gather up all the notes and put them on the desk. Put the books and the articles in a pile in the corner. That gives me some space. The floor is clear. On the shelves around the room are so many books, all sorts of books that have led me here. There's a story here somewhere:

Lots of stories in fact but what use are they to me now? How can they be part of this story? What sort of story is this? Maybe it's a mystery, a detective story. I go to the shelf and find some old Raymond Chandler books hidden behind a picture of my eldest son. Stories of how the dark 'truth' of human beings emerges the more you look beyond the surface. Left along the shelf I can see the collection of stories by Raymond Carver: 'Where I'm Calling From' (1993). One of the stories inside has that title. The narrator in that story knows it is time to be honest as he prepares to telephone his wife from the drying out clinic:

'She'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her.' (p. 242)

That's what I want to do now with the rest of this chapter: tell you where I'm calling from amongst all these words.

My approach was to deliberately focus on individuals and to engage in an intensely personal type of research process. I found experimenting with these methods rewarding, exciting and liberating, but never settling or reassuring. I came to understand and agree with Schon (1971) that all real change and learning involves feelings of ‘being at sea, of being lost, of confronting more information than you can handle' (p.12). The discussions illuminated several of the key issues about becoming and being a teacher educator in the 21st Century but it was never their purpose to identify universal processes or generalisations. The feeling of being at sea did not go away but rather I developed some ‘sea legs’ and learnt to move and think in a way that allowed new types of understanding to emerge. Through this process of research and writing I found new ways of living and working with uncertainty. The sharing of stories illuminates the often hidden and private experiences that give meaning to everyday life, making things more visible without making them simple. In some ways I think this is enough as the reader, the audience, make meaning from the way we tell the story. The stories themselves have an evocative validity as they bring the news of experience and response from one person’s world to another.

Rosen (1993) says that stories live off stories and that of all the genres learned through language . . .

*narrative is the genre we are most comfortable with. From a very early age we gather a rich experience of stories and learn more and more how they work, their methods and devices. So in our tellings, without our realising it, we use this hidden repertoire. . . We are all story tellers if only we are given the chance. (p. 51)*

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 shapes 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. So
I felt as though consulting the sources such as my diary or other people who were there was no more or less ‘reliable’ or ‘valid’ than any other method and that this sort of reliability was not the central issue here. Any attempt to make an ‘accurate’ history of my learning journey would be firstly in vain and secondly fundamentally miss the point. 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. 108).*

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.

**IT STARTED LIKE THIS:**

*It is well into September now and it feels a bit strange. I am at home writing this, trying to make a story about how I came to be here and I keep feeling as though I should be somewhere else. Life stories are to some extent always provisional and they often contain uncertain and contradictory elements. The significance of the myths we live by (Samuel and Thompson, 1990) lies not so much in whether they can be fixed as either true or false expressions of experience but in the ways in which they are constructed and told in an attempt, as Brian Roberts (1998) puts it, ‘to make sense of the past and our part in it, and how we have become what we believe we want to be’ (p. 103). For many years of my life what I wanted to be was a teacher and then a teacher of teachers. I became a primary school teacher in 1991 and a senior lecturer in a university school of education in 2004, but now, as a song from my past reminds me ‘it’s late September and I really should be back at school’ and I am here writing this. Out ‘there’ the children are working through the literacy hour, the teachers are sharing their learning intentions with the class and the lecturers are reading emails and attending meetings (the students aren’t back yet), and I am writing this and trying to find a voice that sounds like mine and tells my tale.*

**Perceived success or failure in education often holds a key role in autobiographical texts (Dunn, 1990; Goldman, 1997; Mills, 1978) and it has a central place in my own story of my self. Perhaps like Roberts (1998) I have a mystery to solve: ‘in the story of my education and its outcome I see a puzzle: what are the key elements and how do they connect to produce the particular ending?’(p.104).**

*We can tell our tales in all sorts of ways and never get to an ending but as it is September and this is the story of my education I really should be back at school.*
MY TELLING TALE

My parents had faith in education. It worked for them. They gained qualifications at school and trained as nurses. They met in Brighton where they had gone to complete their training in 1950. They liked reading and discussion and going to see plays and they believed that education was the route towards a better life for individuals and a better society for all. They were part of the post-war consensus which supported the welfare state. They voted for the Labour party and described themselves as socialists. I have two brothers who are six and four years older than me. My eldest brother was assessed as having learning difficulties during the early years of school and attended a special school from the age of seven. My other brother did well at primary school, passed the eleven-plus and went to a technical school. I started at a state nursery school at the age of 3 in 1963. There seems to have been a bit of a problem from the start...

AND IT ENDED LIKE THIS

When I started a full-time job in the school of education at the university it felt like coming home. And so it was. But coming home is often a mixed experience and in the end it did not work out for me.

At the university I had the unusual experience of becoming less confident the longer I worked there and I felt less and less authentic as the months went by. While I had felt like part of the problem in the education system to some extent as a school teacher and as an advisor I always felt that I was contributing something positive as well; something that some of the children would benefit from at some time. I used to call this ‘nourishment’: the knowledge that what one is doing is something worthwhile and making a contribution. I got less and less ‘nourishment’ at the university until it felt as though the scales had tipped and I could not enjoy the parts of the job I had loved at first. There seemed like even less time to think and to reflect upon things although I was in the habit of doing that now. It may well have been better not to in a way but I was committed to finishing something I had started and it seemed like a betrayal of my beliefs about learning to turn away now that I had found a comfortable job. Not that it was very comfortable by the last year when I knew I had to leave, do something else and tell my tale for better or for worse.

SHARING

If writing the story was a method of inquiry in itself, what Richardson (2000) calls Creative Analytic Practice, where process and product are displayed as deeply intertwined, then sharing it with the other teacher educators was an invitation for the reader to examine their own narrative after reading the memories of another. While
the process of writing a self-narrative invokes memory and brings new understanding within a current context for the writer, it also opens this possibility for the reader; a collaboration that is waiting to happen.

The collaboration that is waiting to happen links closely with Anderson’s (2006) principal point of connecting self-narrative with the narrative of others in ethnographic study and emphasises the potential of the relationship between self-narrative and life history interview methods where the self-narrative of the researcher is foregrounded. Such collaborations can bring, as Raymond Carver suggests ‘news from one world to another’ (Carver, Gentry & Stull, 1990, p. 52) and they can also encourage, expand and develop perspectives and understandings within particular cultures and groups such as that of teacher educators. The engagement with the voices of others became the key vehicle of questioning and developing my own understanding and a way in which to share and compare accounts of experiences so as to extend that understanding further.

I was inspired by Munro (1998) who develops Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the dialogic self and examines how her life history work with women teachers works at the intersection of autobiography, narrative and life history research. This seems to be where I too settled as the discussions proceeded. 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.

MEETING SUZANNE

We first met at a teacher education conference. The theme was male teachers at Key Stage 1 which was really about the lack of male teachers of children aged three to seven, the old ‘infant’ age phase. Suzanne and I had both been teachers at infant schools early in our teaching careers; me in the mid 1990s and Suzanne back in the 1970s. We got talking about the changes in educational terminology and how particular ideas come around time and again with a different name.

We had both moved into Higher Education in our late 40s. Suzanne was coming up for retirement in two years. I told her I was a late starter and had a while to go yet:

‘Late starter - how come?’ She had asked me.

‘I didn’t get any qualifications until I was 25, and then went to poly when I was 27. So PGCE then started teaching in 1990.’

Her route had been more direct: left school with good grades, went to Teacher Training College then got a job in 1970. She was only 10 years older than me but she had been a teacher twice as long. She wondered why I hadn’t taken any exams at school.

‘Oh there’s a story there,’ I said ‘I’m writing about it at the moment as part of my Doctorate.’

She was surprised: ‘Can you do that? Write about yourself for a PhD?’

‘Well it’s partly that. It’s an EdD. I’m aiming to share the story with colleagues, other teacher educators . . . like you.’
There was a pause of some length. She didn’t seem keen.
‘Then I’ll interview them,’ I explained, ‘gather responses, things in common, things that are different.’
‘Will they all work at your place in Brighton?
‘No, some from Brighton. All teacher educators based in schools of Ed, but from all over really.’
She was smiling now. She said ‘Did you grow up in Brighton?’
‘Yes, I did.’
‘Me too,’ she laughed . . . ‘I’ll read it if you like.’

London in November. Getting dark at 4pm. The traffic building up. The streets are wet although it doesn’t seem to have been raining since I left the station and started walking. I know where I’m going. I came to the Uni where Suzanne works a while ago for a job interview. I need to get a job before March which will be a year since I quit the job at Brighton. I remember being nervous on the train and then relaxing when I started walking. Always helps. Just the movement of walking. Something happens to the mind at 3 miles an hour. Felt OK by the time I got to the interview. Quite relaxed. I didn’t get the job.
Suzanne is waiting in the foyer with her coat on, which makes my heart sink. It looks like she is leaving and won’t have time for our meeting.
‘Let’s walk,’ she says. ‘We can talk on the way.’

I never did find out where we were on our way to but we walked and talked for two hours. This was the first of three walks we took together while I wrote the thesis, and the first of seven before Suzanne died in 2011. Moving meetings. She wrote to me later that week in November 2007:

Thanks for coming up and having a walk with me. I expect you would have rather met in the office and taped the whole thing but as I said, I really needed to get out. So much easier to talk to someone when you are walking side-by-side. Glad it didn’t rain. Anyway, I thought it might help if I wrote about some of the things we talked about. Reading your story made me think about so much in my story. I thought it would be the bits about Brighton but it was more the details of your education and career. These are especially interesting to me now that you’ve resigned. You said you envied me because I took a direct route to teaching and then to HE but as I told you, I really envy your circuitousness. You learnt so much about teaching by not being a teacher for all those years while I was learning about what teachers were meant to be like.

I wanted to be a teacher since I was about eleven. I think I was also inspired by a couple of teachers at school, but like the one you went to there were enough bad ones in our school to put me off the idea if I’d wanted them to. So I’m not really sure why I swung that way. I enjoyed it most of the time and my parents were so proud of me. They thought I was right posh. In the 26 years that I taught in schools I went from being single to being married, to having
two children, to being a single Mum. My kids were at University by the time I left to come into HE. Coming into teacher training felt like a new start for me. I was ready for a change. In the first year, I couldn’t believe how easy it seemed and in the second year I couldn’t believe how difficult it was.

Like you I come from a fairly poor background. Central Brighton. The house, in fact the whole street has gone now and been replaced by a car park and, rather ironically, a school. My Mother and Father got moved to a council house which was fine really.

I was surprised when I found out where Suzanne had lived as a child. The area and the street she had lived in were well known for their poverty when I was a boy. In the sixties people used to say the houses would fall down before they were knocked down. It was just that, unlike me, Suzanne had no trace of a working class accent by the time I met her when she was 58. There was none of that Brighton accent with the ‘Ts’ missing. My accent had been modified by adult education and becoming a teacher but Suzanne sounded like someone who might have gone to public school.

The thing that I really connected with in your story was your description of the gap between how you want to be and how you are. Like the gap between pedagogy professed and pedagogy as practiced in teaching and especially in HE. But you know I think that’s a common feeling for people from backgrounds like ours.

I had never thought of it like that before although I had written about what you could lose as well as gain in Higher Education in my own story:

I did well at the polytechnic which became a university. I was ready to study and to write and I enjoyed pretty much all of it. I made some good friends. For a while early on I felt as though I was in a sort of social limbo, not part of the younger student group who were fresh out of sixth form and no longer part of the old crowd at the pub. They thought I had lost my mind going ‘back to school’ and that I ought to at least do something useful like a government training course where I could learn a trade. My wife and my mother were not sure either.

As a lecturer I had felt some resentment towards students from more privileged backgrounds who seemed to be taking their opportunities for granted.

Suzanne wrote:

I have felt some of the resentment that you mention about ‘spoilt brats’ not knowing how lucky they are but I think you are being harsh. Most of them become thoughtful teachers. I’ll be glad to retire in a couple of years but the thing I like best about this job is seeing the students change and grow during the degree. I like being part of that. Some of them are just kids when they arrive and they leave ready to teach a class of children. That’s quite a journey they’ve made.
What I hate is this feeling that we are really just a franchise of the Department for Education and the Training and Development Agency. We talk about our vision as a school of education and then a memo arrives telling us what our vision is and what and how to teach our students. One of our managers told us all at a meeting that we had to adapt to changing times and that we couldn't hold onto our principles. If we can't hold onto our principles what can we hold onto?

Davies (1997) says that reflective ethnography should be seen as an interrelationship between researcher and other to inform and change social knowledge, and to some extent Suzanne and I shared the role of researcher and researched. We examined elements of our ethnos through our interactions while reading, writing, talking and walking.

MOVING STORIES

My feet are bigger than Suzanne's but she has longer legs. She sets an early pace which is faster than suits me, but slows as she seems to leave something behind her. She eases up to re-engage during the walk as she gets something out of her system. When we walked in London she hadn't said much for the first two miles which took about 40 minutes: she listened a lot, nodded, and offered short answers to match my short strides. There were lots of gaps when we didn't say anything. We didn't need to fill the gaps because we were walking side by side rather than sitting and talking face to face. Then as we slowed she started talking, responding further to my story which she had read, and then asking questions of her own. Today, on the Downs, the gaps are longer but the conversation more symmetrical and she is talking as much as I am. I realise that you get to know someone in a new way when you walk with them.

It’s a simple thing in some ways, an everyday wonder in others. No knowing quite where the movement begins and ends: muscles moving, leg swings, heel down, the weight above the ball of the foot, the big toe pushes off while the balance shifts across the body. There is a step and then another. A word joined by a word that makes a story. The rhythm builds like a story. The rhythm of walk with the pattern of talk.

Thoreau (1862) saw walking as an art and writes of the genius of ‘sauntering.’ The word derives from people who walked around the countryside in the middle ages asking for charity as they made their way to the Holy Land, (la Sainte Terre), without ever attempting to get there. I love to saunter. To walk without real purpose of destination. I realise that you get to know yourself in a new way when you walk with someone else.

While Rousseau (1782) revived the ancient notion that cognition is motion-sensitive and made it famous in the modern Western world (although it was long established in non-western cultures), Macfarlane (2012) argues that walking is not the action by which one arrives at knowledge; it is itself a means of knowing.
... a foot-worn crevasse into the underlying snow of the chalk - a gap through which one
might slip not just to another time, but to another realm or climate (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 24)

I would say the same about writing. In Notes towards a Supreme Fiction (1955,
p. 336) Wallace Stevens suggested that:

Perhaps
The truth depends upon a walk around a lake.

I go along with that.

Suzanne and I both knew how to go to ground when we needed to. We appreciated
the simple gratification of physical movement, what Law (1995, p. 9) calls the
‘solidity and certainty of labour’:

Suzanne: I get really sick of the abstract. Thinking all the bloody time. That’s not
where I come from. Just feeling the ground under my feet as I walk over it
feels a bit like coming home.

It had always been like that for me too: moments of clarity when you can measure
the distance you cover by looking back at distance done. Solnit (2008) may be right
when she says that walking can be an act of resistance to the power of the mainstream
(p. 451).
De Certeau (1980) suggests that meaning emerging as narrative is also a means of opposing institutional power. The ‘intense singularities’ of storytelling challenge the scientific discourse as it attempts to eliminate ‘time’s scandals.’

Nonetheless they return over and over again, noiselessly and surreptitiously, and not least within the scientific activity itself: not merely in the form of the practices of everyday life which go on even without their own discourse, but also in the sly and gossipy practices of everyday storytelling . . . a practical know-how is at work in these stories, where all the features of the ‘art of memory’ itself can be detected . . . the art of daily life can be witnessed in the tales told about it (p.42).

We told our tales as we walked. The transitory movement of those meetings has come to represent the thing that Suzanne and I had most in common. We had left home and never really arrived at our destination.

‘Nobody tells you what you lose when you get an education do they?’ she said.

She was smiling but seemed sad. She knew the walk would soon be over.

REFERENCES

WHEN WE GOT TO THE TOP OF ELM GROVE


