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7. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN, AND AS, ADULT EDUCATION

Eavesdropping on a Conversation

INTRODUCTION

It is typical of our work in adult education – suggestions made on the run and commitments made in the same way. I was asked to write a chapter on autoethnography as a creative research method in adult education and thought that it would be best written in dialogue and collaboration with others, and presented in an autoethnographic way. Inspired and supported by Ellis and Bochner's conversational method (2008, 2016), I suggest to three colleagues that we, all four, meet for a conversation about our respective experiences of autoethnography and from this write the chapter.

There was ready agreement from all, an appointment made, a conversation had, transcribed and shared. The business and the busyness of life took over though and now, months later, with a deadline straight ahead, I begin to feel that familiar fear: Can we do this? Can we craft something useful out of our conversation? Is it my responsibility or ours? How do I (or we) do justice to the living, exciting method that is autoethnography, staying true to lived experience, harnessing the 'we' in balance with the 'I'? Knowing that it is impossible to re/present exactly who says what and when, the process of retelling is akin to eavesdropping, catching snippets and echoes of conversation.

These are all typical conundrums that autoethnographers ask, since there isn't the comfort of a formula or a stable form – introduction, literature review, data collection and analysis. Autoethnography resists such formulae and the accompanying depersonalized voice, and tries instead to sit with the mess of experience, trusting that something will emerge which somehow renders the mess into a narrative frame that is both an adequate rendering of experience and a useful scholarly inquiry into that experience.

But I am getting ahead of myself. For autoethnographers, like adult educators, context is hugely important: researchers are always real people in real contexts that shape, and are shaped by, our commitments and interests.

WHO ARE WE?

All four of us (Mary, Tony, Jerry, Dave) work as adult educators and see ourselves as creating space for adult learners to learn from, and about, our own lives in a way that offers resources for enhanced awareness and fuller participation in the range of personal and social occupations in which we engage. Such processes of change and development are emergent, requiring a strong sense of subtle, nuanced aspects of imaginative, holistic, emotional and cognitive change. As adult educators, we have all struggled to find research approaches and paradigms that are congruent with this view of transformative adult learning (Dominicé, 1990, 2000; Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 1990, 2006). We have each had quarrels with the modes of writing and research characterized by the “one-dimensional, monochromatic text expected by the academy” (Hoult, 2012, p. 1). As scholars we are keenly aware of the “academic purgatory” into which we can be cast for writing outside (and against) the register of the “supposed objectivism of science drilled into us from our first brushes with academic writing” (Mitchell & Clark, 2018, p. 1).

Writing about, and in, transformative learning requires a commitment to a different kind of scholarly practice grounded in a belief that “to study persons is to study beings existing in narrative and socially constituted by stories” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 197) and working towards the goal “to imagine, discover, or create new and better ways of living” (p. 198).

In narrative inquiry in general, and autoethnography specifically, we believe we have come upon an approach to research that allows us to catch those subtle processes of human growth and transformation in a way that honours the richness and passion with which adults embrace their own growth and development. Autoethnography is, we believe, a method wholly congruent with adult education.

I get to work and I write a few paragraphs that articulate some key aspects of narrative inquiry and autoethnography. In doing so, I risk returning to that same impersonal style of writing that autoethnography works against. Autoethnography, though, usually involves a balance between showing and telling (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011) and to help us in the conversation I draw on some scholarly work that tells us more about these genres.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY & AUTOETHNOGRAPHY – OR INDEED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY & NARRATIVE INQUIRY

We begin from the position that there is no one solid entity known as autoethnography that is easily labelled and categorized. Like every other approach to research, it emerges from paradigms of thought, and is brought forward by researchers who wrestle with research problems in different disciplinary contexts. As adult educators we see story as being a fundamental way of experiencing the world and therefore core to the practice of facilitating transformative adult learning (Randall, 2014). We see human beings as storied, and as constructing and being constructed by

individual and collective experience. From this viewpoint, inquiring into the stories that constitute our lives, understanding the power dynamics that are at play in how stories get made, told and heard, is transformative learning.

Narrative inquiry as a paradigm of research honours this ontology and sees social inquiry as rooted in “stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 20). Research inquiry in this paradigm gathers the stories by means of which we experience and understand our worlds and mines them for the knowledge that resides in our storied framings of experience.

Autoethnography is one key expression emerging from this narrative ontology. Reed-Danahay (1997) points out that autoethnography as a term contains three core elements: *auto* meaning self, *ethno* meaning culture and *graphy* meaning writing. We take this tripartite distinction as a structuring principle in this chapter, but we also recognize that the method is complex and evolving. Autoethnography honours the reality that in any piece of research, the self of the researcher is a substantive, constitutive fabric in the epistemological tapestry. We cannot research narratively without explicitly honouring our selves as substantially present in how we write, think and research.

In this chapter, the relationship between narrative inquiry and autoethnography is foregrounded. Mary and Tony see themselves as narrative inquirers; inquiring into experience with others in terms of the stories that frame that experience. In their studies, autoethnography is a key backdrop to the inquiry, but not the sole focus. For example, Mary situates her research in terms of her own learning biography and her group work practice, which is shaped by her competing identities of group analyst and adult educator.

Tony, likewise, sees his ethnographic study of southern Irish Protestants¹ as coloured by his own experiences. In his narrative inquiry, exploring his own story became a pathway into exploring the stories of others.

In contrast, Jerry and Dave’s work is more solidly located within autoethnographic methodological practices; the experiences of the self of the researcher being the primary focus for the inquiry, the source of experience from which knowledge emerges. Jerry set out to research the experience of other adult educators but methodological and epistemological questions thrown up through the research and the supervisory process prompted an increasingly reflexive gaze back on the self of the researcher, that took him, onto a different, more aesthetic, journey.

Lastly, Dave’s research was autoethnographic from the start, mining as it did, deeply personal and professional experience emerging through reflective practice, culminating in an expanded knowledge of identity issues for adult educators.

EAVESDROPPING: ONE GENRE, DIFFERENT COMMITMENTS

The editors remind me of the deadline, the word count, the overall vision for the book. Here I am, faced with a transcript of our conversation. Let’s eavesdrop ...

Our conversation highlights our excitement about narrative approaches to research and autoethnography, the sense of liberation that we each felt from the constraints of a certain brand of objective academic writing and research. But as the conversation goes on, the differing perspectives we have of autoethnography become evident. Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) point out the ways in which narrative inquiry as a genre of research has itself become a catch-all term, one that involves a wide range of often mutually incompatible commitments. Our conversation reveals some of these differing methodological understandings and the ideological commitments that underpin them. In our conversation, Mary addresses Dave and Jerry, seeing her own approach to autoethnography in contrast to theirs.

So, the pair of you (J and D) are going to say ‘no we’re not like that at all’ (laughter) but I think what strikes me is that the internal journey, the making sense of that inner world is a very rich landscape for both of you. I think what strikes me when I read both your works is that you are drilling down into the deeper recesses of the inner worlds. I think you are both much more literary and interested in the literary world than I am – you play a lot more with ideas than I do, and when I read what you write I get this sense of the absolute pleasure of following ideas or playing with them, seeing where they go. So, it’s much more fluid the way you both write. It’s more to do with feelings and emotions, that’s not to say that I don’t deal with the emotional world but it’s different, and I think yours is much more a literary kind of creative process.

Mary’s thoughts highlight two notions underpinning autoethnography. On the one hand is a concern for the aesthetic, the sense of emotionality, subjectivity, attention to a form of writing that would speak out of, and speak to, hearts as well as minds. This approach takes us in a writerly direction: evocative writing is seen as a method of inquiring into felt experience, using story to understand the flux and complexity of experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Jerry and Dave have both written autoethnographically in the context of adult education in this framework. But Mary approaches research very differently:

I start in a different place. So, mine is always, always rooted in what am I doing in the here and now and how does my practice have meaning? How has it value? What does it connect with? What am I actually trying to do here? How does research help me in the here and now of what I’m trying to do? Narrative inquiry did work for me more because what it kept putting me back into was the actual experience of what I was doing in my pedagogical practice and trying to probe into that and understand it more deeply. This gave me a way of connecting the different identities in myself in the lived experience.

Mary, then, is more drawn to a pragmatic concern, that pedagogical experience is a form of knowledge and that autoethnography is a vehicle for articulating this kind of praxial knowledge. Where evocative autoethnography is concerned with matters

of feeling and story, pragmatic concerns are guided by questions of; what does it tell us about practice, what do we learn from practice, what difference does it make to us in practice?

EAVESDROPPING: CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

But autoethnography does not simply take its definition from the pragmatic or aesthetic distinction. There is also in autoethnography a problematizing of selfhood, a *critical* (Denzin, 2014) perspective on self as an object of inquiry and the sense in which selfhood is a social construction. Tony's research illustrates the contribution autoethnography can make to our understanding of the socially constructed self and to the often unwitting effects of dominant discourse, marginalization and oppression:

And what narrative inquiry and autoethnography gave me was a way of honouring experience but also of exploring the social significance of experience, that it's not just the individual's experience. Each individual is positioned in a much wider range of worlds and their experience is a way into exploring all sorts of nuanced realities and possibilities and layers of culture, of society, of politics, of power, of oppression and of marginalization – all those kinds of things. And so my research was extraordinarily life-giving and to me it seemed to be very much related to what adult education is about – giving us an observer position on experience and what that speaks to in terms of oppression and our own marginality and learning and change and hope.

It was the power of those autoethnographic memories, and I suppose the anger to some degree that arose in me that became a catalyst to explore the areas of marginality – not just in Irish society, I think any group of people who are marginalized share an experience with other people that were marginalized – and autoethnography helped me to explore and analyse the dynamics of power and marginalization.

There is a sense in the conversation that autoethnography is congruent with the commitment in adult education to the intersection between the personal and the political, the ways in which the outer world impinges and shapes the internal world. In this sense we see that adult education at its best is intrinsically an autoethnographic project, an ongoing process of conscientization of how individual and group lives are constructed in and by powerful social contexts and forces. Adult education and autoethnography are both dialogic forms of practice; both emerge from critical engagements with what Jerry refers to in our conversation as 'biographic reflexivity'.

Let's eavesdrop again on Jerry as he feels keenly the ways in which identities are a function of the social institutions we are part of or excluded from. Being in precarious employment and balancing caring roles leaves him on the margins of these social institutions – a place that sensitizes him 'to be critical about the notion of social realities and identities':

So I think that kind of being on the edges of things lets you see that identities are constructed and I think this gives me a predisposition to being critical about the contexts in which they're formed. Even in my own family this happens; like because I do a lot of the caring work, and because I'm not in full-time employment. And when I was growing up, my sisters would often have said 'Ah you were one of the girls anyway'. So even as a child, my gender identity was kind of called into question ... and I think that's a great thing you know. It wrecks your head – but as a critical creative thing it allows you to kind of see through things in some ways.

EAVESDROPPING: WHAT IS THE *AUTO* IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

So, the question emerges as to what is the *auto* in autoethnography; what is selfhood. There are clear dangers that, as a genre, autoethnography can be simplified and watered down into a version of straightforward autobiography. There is a danger that the version of selfhood that is implicated is a straightforward humanist notion predicated on the assumption that we have unproblematic access to selfhood and the wherewithal to tell stories of self in an equally unproblematic manner (Butler, 2005; Davies & Davies, 2007; Gannon, 2006). Autoethnography springs from this paradox, the simultaneous complexity of selfhood and its status as a social achievement.

Adult education exists in exactly this space of recognizing that in a world that is socially constructed there is a sense of fluidity that can be anxiety-provoking as well as liberating. Autoethnography is one way in which we can gain some traction in the process of taking responsibility for shaping selfhood in the context of this fluidity. We can articulate and interrogate in playful and autoethnographic ways. Dave says:

As I see it, transformative learning can take place if you begin to learn that you are storied, and that you are made up of stories and that you are constructed and that you continue to construct your story. I think it's liberating to understand that, rather than you're stuck with who you are, you know.

EAVESDROPPING: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *AUTO* AND *ETHNO* IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

There is a clear challenge in autoethnography concerning how it can be at once deeply personal and at the same time of concern to the wider social and cultural worlds. Autoethnographers can often default on either one of these concerns and lose something vital in the process. Autoethnography requires that we encompass both: it is about the self, of use to the self, but not for the self. So how can we resolve the competing concerns of *auto* and *ethno*? Mary offers a clear ontological position on the relationship between the personal and the social.

Mary: Using autoethnography gave me a space for the notion that there is no such thing as an individual separate to the group, that the individual is

constructed by the group before they even are born. Their story, their identity, is part of that group and the part I think that I liked about autoethnography is that notion of trying to step slightly out of the group to reflect on my individual position but always in the knowledge that I am formed and part of the group. I think my reading of Clandinin and Connelly and narrative inquiry helped me to understand how I am shaped by it, I am fed by the group; I don't exist separate to the group. I don't exist out of relationship.

Dave: But I think I have a sense of what you're saying or the implications of what you're saying is that the auto is always ethno. It is always about the other and the relational. So, the individual is always about the other as well, that the more I can write into how I experience being in this world that's knowledge about self and other; and what reflexivity is to me is that I am then always able to come back into the relationship with that knowledge that self is a way back into other.

Tony: Autoethnography allows the telling of a range of different stories about self and about group, about community, about power, about resistance, about marginalization, about all of those things. In autoethnography we need to be mindful of looking at the group as well as the individual, but also the wider systems that contribute to particular stories.

EAVESDROPPING: WHAT IS THE *GRAPHY* IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY?

Jerry sees an "open text which draws the audience in in the moment and engages them, provokes thinking at a really basic level". Autoethnography is, for him, a textual equivalent of an adult education space, a playful but provocative space in which thought, feeling and reflexivity are stimulated and held. It holds the potential of being a pedagogic, as much as methodological, space, that, drawing on concepts such as Barthes' (1992) "writerly text", can actively engage the reader in meaning-making (to slip you, somehow, into the inquiring, learning text). Autoethnography then typically makes us feel *and* think: we not only tell our story, but we explore it in dialogue with theory and with others, so as to tease out emergent learning.

But the desire for a framework for qualitative inquiry, a 'how to', is always frustrated by the sense that every autoethnography is *emergent*: there are no instrumental guidelines. As we discover in the conversation, there is "only the autoethnography you are writing now". Marshall (2008) reminds us that form emerges in the writing of such reflexive genres and this demands a well-developed capacity for patiently working with nuanced processes of emergence, sitting with the anxiety of not knowing. If adult education is a border country in which disorientation, anxiety and loss are precursors to transformative learning, then autoethnography requires the same supports and disciplines.

Mary recognizes that such messy processes and texts necessitate good supervisory holding, especially with the backdrop of the university as a potentially conservative

audience to what is sometimes perceived as an experimental research method. Jerry refers to the group process that fostered his own autoethnography: the group provided a safe and trusting context for emergent reflexivity: this “could only have happened in a kind of pedagogic space that trusted people to interrogate their own biographies critically in a trusting space”.

METHODOLOGICAL SCAFFOLDING

But still I'm not happy. During our conversation, we talked about the difficulty of autoethnography, the way in which it requires resources of honesty, creativity as well as scholarship. I think of my students and their demands for clarity on structure, format and process in conducting their research. I feel the need to offer readers some advice, so I revisit my own experience as an autoethnographer and ask the others to do likewise: what advice would you give? What advice would you like to have been given? What follows are some suggestions for scaffolding that can help us in the challenging and exciting process of creating autoethnographies.

Choose Your Topic Carefully

Autoethnography isn't about writing what is already known, it is about writing into the unknown. So when choosing a topic make sure that you choose something that you are passionate to know more about, to sustain you in the gradual process of coming to know. Therefore, it is important to be open to the unexpected, in the process of the inquiry, you may encounter something new and unanticipated that will challenge your assumptions and expectations.

Reading Other Autoethnographies

There is no formula for an autoethnography and this can be a frustration. However, there is a growing body of scholarly work across a variety of disciplines and becoming familiar with a range of approaches will help to inspire your own approach and your own form. Read widely, find voices that help you to find your own.

Reflexivity

Autoethnography is essentially a reflexive project at a number of levels. It requires you to be both fully in your own experience and still to have the capacity to think about the lenses through which you interpret and therefore shape your own experiences. It is useful to share your writings with critical others, especially those skilled in illuminating blind spots.

Journaling

Journaling is a strong resource for engaging in this reflexive project. In journaling you can catch yourself being yourself (Cixous, 1997, p. 13), developing your capacity to be fully immersed in experience while also in an observer position.

Internal and External

Reflexivity requires that we are finely attuned to the ways in which our experience of our personal and social world involves a complex dynamic between our internal and external worlds. The response of the other is essential in developing insight and knowledge. We are shaped by wider society and relationship, but we also shape them in turn and autoethnography is a keen intervention in that process.

Relationship with Reader

In all writing we need to pay attention to our audience, but in autoethnography we seek to pay particular attention to the reader as participant in the process of meaning-making. We are not seeking to convince them intellectually but allow them into a living experience, bringing them with us, allowing them to experience things vicariously and therefore provoking a response.

Dialogue with Theory

One of the hallmarks of autoethnography is the practice of critical analysis and reflection where the autoethnographer becomes forensically alive to the experiences of their life and its contexts. The extent to which conceptual and theoretical resources are brought to bear on this project are core. This does not require a change of voice or of register, rather theory is a resource that can be used to shape the meanings and significances that emerge from our reflexive engagements with our storied experience.

The 'Other' in Autoethnography

Though autoethnography is about the 'self', this does not preclude others as co-researchers. Autoethnography profoundly requires the support of others. In this research modality collaborations and conversations are often used to deepen inquiry, enabling all concerned to reflect on their experiences and learn from them. Narrative research is inherently a relational endeavour, as a researcher you are often in an intimate/personal relationship with participants and a professional relationship with the scholarly community. Autoethnography as a method, then, often requires of us that we manage the tensions of occupying multiple positions simultaneously: such as, colleague, peer, educator, researcher.

POSTSCRIPT

Around the time when we were pulling this chapter together through our reflections, conversations, and shared writing and responses, I found myself driving homewards from a conference in Sligo where I had just presented a paper-poem on a more recent engagement with a narrative practice. In Irish terms, it was a long drive: 257 km home across the breadth of the island.

My drive, west-to-east, was a movement against a well-established trope, and, as Enright (2015) points out, almost cliché, in Irish cultural practice that, usually, draws the artist from the east to western spaces to explore the inner world in communion with a sublime landscape. But, for me, this is what a lot of my narrative methodology seems to have become, a movement, a writing against the grain – and from this counter-movement a messy methodology has emerged slowly that locates itself in and around process-orientated and dissonant epistemologies.

Writing and movement as method – a way through to knowledge.

And on this slow movement across the island, I had, for once, the space and time to think about a million and one things: the conference I had just left, this emerging chapter and, of course, eavesdroppers such as yourself.

As Sligo receded into my rear-view mirror, I pondered on the paper-poem of that morning. I was happy how it went. Happy that it went the way I intended, but also a bit bemused at its reception. I had the familiar feeling of being somewhat at the methodological margins and I wondered if the performance and play of knowledge is, in one sense, respected and acknowledged, but maybe, for many, not regarded as the serious stuff of an academic conference. And despite inviting everyone there, as I moved into the poem that morning, “to listen with another ear” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 366), I felt that it really is quite hard work to speak, and maybe more so, to listen, against dominant ways of knowing. But for me, now, for this kind of work, there is no other way and so it doesn’t bother me – or maybe, more truthfully, it bothers me less.

And as I continued eastwards in a car barely up for the journey, my thoughts settled on this piece of writing we are working through and, specifically, a knot in the text that I felt was there for a while but which, somehow, we had loosened through our conversations, emails and shared pieces of writing. It was in this dynamic and dialogic subtext – the words that are underneath and behind all this – where we talked and wrote our way through our different approaches and conceptions of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. And, in the end, what came into focus for me through all this was, despite different methodological nuances in our approaches to research, that the four of us, quite simply, get each other.

We get that the thing that grounds us in our different ways of working with stories in research, is our attendance to process, context and transformation – in short that, our adult educator ways of knowing and being is the fertile soil and common ground out of which our varied takes on narrative and autoethnography emerge. It is a

practice, either with learning groups or research participants, that strives to balance the personal with the collective, the inner world with the outer. A practice that tries, always, to create spaces which allow stories to be told with a sensitivity to power so we can hear and amplify marginal voices in that foundational purpose towards transforming people's lives and the worlds they inhabit.

And so, if it is our positions as adult educators that, fundamentally, orientate the four of us, then, it may be no surprise that our final thoughts turn to you ... that often-neglected subject space in scholarly writing between the first and third person ... we wonder how all this will orientate you in your quest for some methodological direction in your work ... you may have come to this chapter as part of that search for the mythical text that will, somehow, reveal, step-by-step, how to 'do' autoethnography.

... but maybe your starting point can be found, not in the solid black ink of our words, but in the whiteness that holds them and follows this ... that you, like us, need to write into and through to your knowledge ... and ... so ...

as our voices fade ...

down into the ...

open white spaces of epistemological possibilities ...

... as our ellipses flat-line our thoughts ...

... we invite you to move out from the shadowed silence of the eaves ...

... we invite you to respond ...

... to revive our knowledge with yours ...

...to find the knot in all this that you'd like

to unravel ... to work through ...

and use that as a place to write into or against ...

... we invite you to respond ...

...so, go on ...

... find the knot in all of this ...

find your space

... open your journal ...

... and write ...

write anything ...

just write ...

NOTE

- ¹ On the achievement of political Independence in 1922, Ireland became a state whose social, political and religious life was rigorously controlled by a coalition of rigid Catholicism and fundamentalist nationalism. In this chilly environment the tiny (and, until recently, shrinking) Protestant minority constituted the main cultural and religious alternative to the prevailing hegemony. Its identity, survival and modes of resistance were the core focus of Tony's inquiry.

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