Northumbria Research Link

THE USE OF AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY IN CLASSROOM BASED PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

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Abstract

Auto-ethnography is a methodology which has frequently been used within a variety of academic disciplines. It has been used within education but this has largely been within Further Eduction settings. This review of auto-ethnography highlights how it can be used by practitioner researchers from other educational settings and is based upon research conducted for a thesis set within a primary Pupil Referral Unit. The findings of this study indicated that auto-ethnography has benefits for both the practitioner researcher and for the pupils involved within the research. Criticisms of the methodology are discussed, including that of it being highly evocative, with the suggestion made that a more analytical approach to auto-ethnography can not only address criticisms of the method making it more acceptable within traditional approaches to academic research but can also maintain the emotional heart without letting this dominate. Conclusions are drawn about the benefits to self expression, teacher/pupil relationships, pupil voice and teacher voice.

Key words: auto-ethnography, practitioner research, narratives, analytic

Introduction

Auto-ethnography is relatively new research method which developed in the 1970s within anthropological research. The term was first used in 1975 by Heider to describe research where members of a particular culture describe their experiences to others (Heider, 1975). Initially the method remained within its anthropological roots but by the 1980s the method had been adopted by wider range of groups including sociologists, women's studies and gender studies (Denzin, 2013). By the 1990s the method had become more personalised with evocative auto-ethnography writing published by sociologists such as Ellis and Bochner on highly personal subjects including the death of a partner (Ellis, 1998). For many, auto-ethnography is a personal challenge but one that allows an individual voice to have an impact on a wider sociological level (Wall, 2008b). Although there are examples of auto-ethnography across a variety of disciplines including

nursing (Foster et al., 2006), social work (Kanuha, 2000) and anthropology (Khosravi, 2007) it was its use in education that was most relevant to my role as a teacher.

Auto-ethnography and educational research

For some the self reflection of auto-ethnography was akin to the self-reflection that teachers needed to fulfil their role (Hayler, 2010). For others it was the direct impact that it could have on professional practice and its ability to impact upon social change that gave it credibility (Starr, 2010). It had become relevant to my thesis because it allowed me to reflect upon the professional requirements of my role and my personal experiences of my pupils (Buckle, 2009) which had formed a large part of my own research.

As a practitioner researcher I found emancipation in the experimental auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2004), where Ellis described teaching a course on auto-ethnography to a fictionalised group of students. I was able to access the world that she created which was entertaining and relevant to my classroom practice and research for auto-ethnographic writing enabled readers to enter into worlds that have been previously hidden (Boyle and Parry, 2007) which includes schools and classrooms. Auto-ethnography enables researchers to write themselves into their research as data allowing a unique perspective to be heard (Wall, 2008a). When one considers the knowledge and experience of teachers which currently has a limited scope to be heard, the ability to share this with a wider audience could have a significant impact upon our understanding of current educational policy and societal issues (Holt, 2008).

Choosing to write in an auto-ethnographic style can offer an alternative voice to the long held dominance of more scientific forms (Wall, 2008a). It can enable researchers to acknowledge the impact that their own identities, beliefs and values have on research as well as seeing the same in those who may be participants (Adams et al., 2014). Within educational research there is scope for teachers to be able to write in depth about their lived experiences of educational practices, such as curriculum changes, as well as offering rich data to complement more traditional research methods, such as an interviews or questionnaires.

Educational research has ethical implications both in relation to writing about young people within a setting or individual colleagues/schools; to be able to identify individuals or settings from a piece of auto-ethnographical research would be both unprofessional and highly unethical. However the benefit of auto-ethnography where there is a focus on the *message* and *emotions* of the research means that fictionalised narratives can be used to protect participants without loosing the rich data that is produced. For example Hannula exemplified the fictional writing style to demonstrate how it could be used to give a deeper insight into the problematic relationship of a student with their maths teacher without making either identifiable (Hannula, 2003).

Using an auto-ethnographic methodology that has a fictionalised narrative element requires a unique relationship between the author and readers of their research as there needs to be trust to accept that what is said to have happened was the case even if it is presented through story. This has been termed 'authorial honesty' (Sikes, 2012).

Criticisms of auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnography as a method is not without its critics. One argument is based around the notion of the auto-ethnography being seen in terms of a cult (Atkinson et al., 2008), a highly subjective term is unnecessarily derogatory rather than critically engaging yet highlighting the often passionate defence of the form by some of its leading figures (Ellis, 2009). However this is not a lone voice with the most succinct response, outlining six major criticisms, argued by Delamont:

1. auto-ethnography cannot fight familiarity
2. auto-ethnography is hard to publish ethically
3. auto-ethnography lacks analysis
4. auto-ethnography is focused on those in power not the powerless
5. auto-ethnography removes the need for us to go out and get data
6. 'we' are simply not interesting enough to write about (Delamont, 2007)

Delamont elaborated on this further with a comparison about her research into capoeira and personal moments of crisis; she maintained that her personal crises did not add any new knowledge (Delamont, 2009). However auto-ethnographers view these small

moments of crisis as entirely valid; the 'space between', the personal response to a subject, is important (Starr, 2010) and our experiences of events add to the wider knowledge.   The act of becoming self aware could have an impact on wider societal issues for example Yang specifically looked at her role as a qualitative researcher within a positivistic institution offering her experiences and personal reflection as a means of discussing wider academic and political concerns (Yang, 2012).

Delamont's concerns about ethics are important, however there is the assumption made that all other forms of research are *easy* to publish ethically. I strongly agreed with Ellis' defence of auto-ethnographical ethics and her belief that we needed to be accountable for what we write and accept that it may hurt others or ourselves; one should approach auto-ethnographic research with honesty and integrity (Ellis, 2004). Delamont raised a further concern regarding the ethics of those being written about and the ease in which they could be identified in auto-ethnographic writing (Delamont, 2007) and is a concern that Ellis faced in the years after her research into the Fisher Folk (Ellis, 2009). It has been an issue faced by those using the method within educational research specifically when writing about pupils or their families (Clough, 2002). This was therefore one argument of Delamont's that I agreed with which led me to the creation of fictionalised characters within my research to prevent this (Ellis, 2004). Delamont's most pressing criticism of auto-ethnography is the lack of analysis it offers However there is a form of auto-ethnography put forward by Anderson which seeks to address this (Anderson, 2006).

Analytic auto-ethnogrpahy

Delamont's criticisms of a lack of analysis are valid when one focuses on emotional auto-ethnographic research such as by Ellis working with a cancer patient (Ellis, 1999). However Anderson comprehensively argues how auto-ethnography can be analytical; his five key principles were an attempt to encourage those interested in auto-ethnography to move away from purely evocative writing:

1. Complete member researcher
2. Analytic reflexivity
3. High visibility
4. Dialogue with informants

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5. Theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006)

Anderson emphasised a need to strike the right chord. This was crucial as, "If you are a storyteller rather than a story analyst then your goal becomes therapeutic rather than analytic" (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p.745) and it was this narcissistic element that many, such as Delamont, criticised. Anderson's principles have been used by educational researchers conducting auto-ethnography, such as Hayler, as a means to locate their research within more widely accepted and traditional ethnographic research (Hayler, 2010). It was this broader understanding of analytic auto-ethnography that I used within my own classroom research to formulate several conclusions about the benefits of the method for classroom practitioners.

Analytic auto-ethnography benefit one - stories and self expression

The social structure that we exist within, such as a classroom, impacts upon our identity (Burke, 2005) although this is not an opinion universally held (Cerulo, 1997). Throughout my time actively researching in the classroom, my feelings of having a shared social identity ebbed and flowed coinciding with the growing strength of relationships (being in the in-group) and then the dramatic change in them when I changed jobs (being in the out-group) (Burke, 2000). It has been said that the only way that this lived time can be expressed is through story (Bruner, 2004). I found that when the pupils were able to tell their story through their own devices, the stories told were a self expression of events that mattered to them; stories that they wanted to tell. The pupils' story telling allowed them to create what Schiffrin calls a self portrait which was also a means of expressing their identity (Schiffrin, 1996); their stories were a way of expressing who they were (Uszyńska‑Jarmoc *, 2004), (Polkinghorne, 1991).

Our use of stories is a means of constantly forming our identity through a process of self editing which means that the 'authentic' self is constantly being redefined (Bamberg, 2011). My own story, including my stories of being a teacher, could be deemed to be a psychosocial life story due to the importance of social relationships both from my childhood and in the setting of the school where I was working (James L. Peacock, 1993). This unravelling of my own life story and the impact on where I was working and the young people I was with was a journey of self reflection and gradual understanding of the data I

was receiving; it is possible for such biographical data to form part of a higher degree through an interpretive learning process (Stroobants *, 2005). My research contained auto-ethnographic stories that were a form of my own self expression and allowed me as a teaching professional to share my experiences, thoughts and feelings with my identity of being a teacher merely one facet of myself. Auto-ethnography highlight the impact of a personal life within professional world (Edward Pajak, 1989).

Analytic auto-ethnography benefit two - teacher/pupil relationships

Children and teachers are shaped by their relationships and stories (Clandinin et al., 2006) and it is crucial to understand the uniqueness of each through engaging with pupils in a relationship that is deeper than a surface meeting. However the relationships that they establish are not equal and appropriate emotional and physical distance must be maintained. Failure to do so places teachers at risk of misconduct often struggling to maintain boundaries (Colnerud, 2006). However teachers are given responsibility for making a range of decisions on behalf of their pupils, especially those who are deemed to be more vulnerable (Greenway et al., 2013). Improved teacher/pupil relationships can only lead to more positive outcomes for pupils especially in relation to prevention and intervention strategies within the classroom (Hamre and Pianta, 2006).

Teachers build relationships that run deeper than those outside of the profession might expect in a day to day classroom environment and there are a variety of reasons for this. Firstly it can be due to personality transactions that are more positive as seen in research on adult personal relationships (Neyer et al., 2014); there are pupils who teachers naturally build a positive shared relationship of understanding. Secondly it maybe due to individual pupils reminding us of ourselves or our own children; it may be that some pupils present similar personality types to the way that we work and understand the world. Whatever the cause, teacher's concerns for their pupils are not simply in the here and now but are also based upon who that young person will become (Uitto and Syrjälä, 2008). Zimmerman's classification of identities is useful (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998) especially for understanding classroom relationships (Richards, 2006). Classroom relationships grow out of Zimmerman's *situated identity* where people play the ascribed roles of teacher and pupil in the same way that we play the role of customer when at the supermarket checkout; this level of identity is our the default setting (Richards, 2006),

(Zimmerman, 2004) for teachers act like a teacher because they are qualified as one and in a classroom environment. However my own realisation was that my relationships with my class were at their deepest when I was being fully myself; this is more in line with the notion of a *transportable identity*. This concept allows for features of our identity to be used across a range of social situations. Zimmerman's original concept limited these to three features age, sex and race (Mieroop, 2010) and are relatively easy to assign (Nakamura, 2012). However I felt that there was a deeper level to transportable identity that was more elusive but none the less parts of ourselves that we carried from social situation to social situation: an epistemological belief system. The concept of an epistemological belief system was influenced by the research of Perry (Perry Jr, 1968) however later research expanded and developed the concept (Schommer-Aikins, 2004) strengthening the links between beliefs, teachers and pupils. Deeply held epistemological beliefs are ingrained in who we are. Therefore they journey with us wherever we go, including from home to classroom.

Analytic auto-ethnography can enable teachers engaged in classroom research to use their transportable identity to relate their personal lives with their professional ones. This in turn serves to develop deeper teacher/pupil relationships which generated rich data about the life inside the classroom.

Analytic auto-ethnography benefit three - authentic pupil voice

Some children may have limitations to their voice due to physical and medical reasons such as Autism (Rajeswari et al., 2011) or selective mutism (Muris and Ollendick, 2015). Others may lack a language suitable for the country in which they are in (Ludhra and Lewis, 2011). The largest reason why children are voiceless is simply because they are children; the opportunities for their voices to be heard vary depending upon the social situation they are in (Maybin, 2013). In modern British society we do not view children to be able to take greater control of other aspects of their lives until their late teens[1] and until then the balance of power lies with adults. Children who are developing within normal expectations display language skills that develop rapidly during the first three years (Anisfeld, 2014): a parent is the first voice many children encounter and it speaks for them

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[1]http://www.fpa.org.uk/factsheets/law-on-sex

from their earliest days; it interprets babbles and cries and gives them meaning. As the child grows, the parent gives the chid greater freedom of choice and voice yet the child's voice remains limited. Not all children develop in social settings that are supportive of developing voice and are often voiceless within their own families.

However there are opportunities where children experience and are supported to develop these skills. One example is how the medical profession works in conjunction with parents and children to make decisions about their future. There have been moves in recent years to include children's wishes about the type of treatment that they are receiving to support them in developing a sense of self (Hallström and Elander, 2004) and in the UK, children under the age of 16 can refuse consent for medical treatment within ambiguous parameters (Alderson, 1992). In Belgium this opportunity for a child to have a medical 'voice' has extended to discussion about their right to decide how and when to die[2].

Within education the notion of pupil voice has grown over a number of years. Schools developed councils with pupil representatives in order to have pupils making decisions about their educational environment (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000), (Cotmore, 2004). Councils can be rather tokenistic, often having more of a negative impact upon pupil well being than if there had been no council in the first place (Lundy, 2007). It is my belief that pupil voice in school is not about pupils making 'real' decisions; it is about allowing pupils to practice and experience having their voice heard and adults giving space and time to listen and support them in developing it. This seems a more honest and open use of voice rather than portraying it as a genuine act of empowerment for the people that continue to have the balance of power are the adults involved in the school council process. The notion of pupil voice can be complicated and problematic (Arnot & Reay, 2007) which has led to the suggestion by Lundy that it is too limited and needs updating (Lundy, 2007). Whilst agreeing that the understanding of pupil voice can be limited and that updating the term would be beneficial, I would be hesitant to attempt to simplify it. It is its complexity that makes it authentic; it is the fact that it is constantly shifting and evolving that gives it value and there will always be uncomfortable elements to it (McIntyre et al., 2005). Attempting to quantify and capture pupil voice limits its effect. If we truly value pupil voice, we will need to be prepared for the messiness that it brings.

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[2]https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22029423-300-should-young-children-have-the-right-to-die/

The use of analytic auto-ethnography can be used to hear an *authentic p*upil voice by recording what pupils actually say and do with minimal interpretation by adults. Presenting the stories of pupils through narrative captures their lived experiences within the classroom providing rich data and removing more tokenistic gestures towards hearing pupil voice.

Analytic auto-ethnography benefit four - authentic teacher voice

In a serious case review conducted my Munro, agencies not listening to adults who spoke on behalf of a child was a key finding (Munro, 2011). However as the importance of pupil voice has grown, teacher voice has been gradually undermined (Bragg, 2007), (Brindley, 2015). This undermining has affected teachers at both national, local and classroom levels. Nationally the introduction of the National Curriculum and a centralised approach to teaching was seen by many as containing a hidden agenda to limit the voices of teachers who were mistrusted in political circles (Barber and Graham, 2013). The role of teachers in being in control of their classroom and having professional freedom had ended and a new era of control and conformity arose. More recent changes in education policy and direction have been widely dismissed by teachers[3] yet even in this case it is the voice of the unions that is most clearly heard as representatives of teacher's voice. Teachers are the objects of educational policy making and not active, voiced participants (Hargreaves et al., 2012). The lived experiences of teachers and their opinions have diminished to the pages of blogs where teachers pour out their thoughts and feelings hidden behind the safety net of anonymity[4]. This is not authentic teacher voice. However it also shows that teachers are not skilled at knowing how to share their voice (Stitzlein and Quinn, 2012) which leads to the question of how this can be better supported.

Practitioner research can enable teachers to have their voices heard (Smiles and Short, 2006) and I would argue that analytic auto-ethnography in particular can support this. The stories that teachers tell are important; there is a wealth of knowledge from inside the classroom that needs to be 'voiced' (Elbaz, 1991); hearing these voices can

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[3]http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22002527
[4]http://www.theguardian.com/profile/the-secret-teacher

improve classroom relationships, reduce teacher turnover and improve academic outcomes too[5]. Auto-ethnography is an accessible form of research for wide audiences to access (Adams et al., 2014). For teachers the method, which does not require prior knowledge of technical terms, is readable and directly relevant to their own classroom experiences.

Conclusion

Auto-ethnography is a research method that can be used by educational researchers within classroom settings. Auto-ethnography can be used to make broad suggestions about the role of the teaching profession in society, including in countries where governments have allowed their ideological opinions to dominate education (Beach et al., 2014). Auto-ethnographic research enables teachers' real experiences to be brought into the light so that they can be discussed and better understood (Smit and Fritz, 2008). It is this understanding that can the be used to develop the profession for the benefit of pupils and teaches alike.

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[5]http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/kahlenberg_potter_sb

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About the author

Helen Woodley is a final year Ed.D student who has researched the perspectives of young people and staff within a Pupil Referral Unit. Her research interests have included the use of auto-ethnography by teachers within the classroom and how fictionalised narratives offer a means of conducting ethical research with young or vulnerable pupils.