Understanding Experience Through Critical Reflection and Expression

¹lorenzo Cherubini
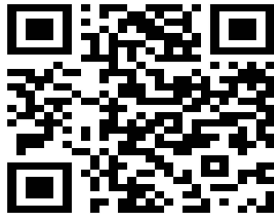
¹Professor, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

Abstract:

Autoethnography represents an opportunity for researchers to locate themselves in the data and interpretation of noteworthy impressions. The specific context that serves as the focus of the autoethnographic study under discussion is multifaceted as it includes my role as a teacher educator and as a researcher. The journal logbooks collected during both an intensive research project with Indigenous teachers and while teaching an undergraduate course to prospective teachers are the data of this systemic analysis of my thoughts as I understand the richness of my experiences in teaching and research. Since autoethnography can also include poetry as a means of self-expression, I share my critical reflection through poetry. The examination of the patterns emerging throughout the reflection logs reveals my intellectual and social engagement in the conversations with Indigenous educators and undergraduate students over the span of an academic semester. I note the exchange of concepts related to teaching, learning, schools, and schooling that on some occasions develop into novel ideas, and at other times become competing representations of learning and research. The patterns in the data underscore the social, cultural, and epistemic complexities of publicly funded classrooms, as they do Indigenous research and ways of knowing. The poetry that represents the discussion of this study points to the critical exploration of my perceptions and beliefs as they exist across varied cultural experiences.

Keywords: Teaching; research, poetry.

Introduction:

Engaging in autoethnographic methodology is, from a personal perspective, a relatively novel approach that has brought to light both a novel way about dealing with data differently, and about reflecting upon one's lived experiences in the context of their research. At first there was a very real sense of hesitation to explore a methodology that is dependent upon one's memory and written recollections of experience. It was imperative to understand how personal story can transcend self-interest and offer relevant insight to broader experiences and interpretations of knowing. As Creswell (1998) suggests, autoethnography represents an opportunity for researchers to locate

themselves in the data and interpretation of noteworthy impressions (see also, Denzin, 2013). Autoethnography is, in fact, a focused approach to the study of oneself in light of a different context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). The specific context that serves as the focus of the autoethnographic study

under discussion is multifaceted as it includes my role as a teacher educator and as a researcher. It focuses on my experiences in an intensive research project with Indigenous teachers across Ontario (Canada) and juxtaposes these perceptions with my experiences as a university educator teaching a third-year undergraduate course to prospective teachers in an Ontario university. The course addresses the core concepts related to critical literacy. In turn, the research project was a collaboration with Indigenous scholars, an Elder, and educators where we discussed their respective perspectives of formal schooling across Ontario, and particularly in relation to provincial education policy. I have had the privilege of learning about how each of these stakeholders interpret the experience of publicly funded education in the unique circumstances of their communities.

The present discussion, therefore, is an autoethnographic approach to better interpret my reflections of these experiences by examining my position and identity as an instructor and across the aforementioned collaborative research endeavor (Hughes & Pennington, 2016). In other words, to analyze the notes in the various journal logbooks collected over the semester and to use these records of observations in a systemic analysis of my thoughts and perceptions as they understand the richness of my experiences in teaching and research (Choi, 2017). The intent is to use autoethnography as a critical lens of sorts to contextualize my own cultural narrative in the socio-historical and socio-cultural realities that inform the teaching and research spaces in which I engage (Holman-Jones, 2005).

Context of The Topic Under Discussion

While it is not the intent of this paper to provide a comprehensive review of my teaching and research contexts, it is nonetheless necessary to share the critical literacy focus in the undergraduate Education courses I teach. The concept of literacy is

presented and discussed as more than fundamental reading and writing, but instead as a critical literacy approach to foster individuals' sense of agency and their ability to examine critically the social and historical constructs of power in consideration of their lived experiences (Freire, 1970; Goodman & Cocca, 2014). In terms of research, the focus of my studies has been on Indigenous students, parents, and the experiences of communities in formal education settings, particularly on their perceptions of schooling in light of the Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME) most recent policies related to educators' roles in response to Indigenous learners' needs and preferences. Our practice has included both quantitative and qualitative approaches and has been conducted in a manner that honours Indigenous research paradigms and ways of knowing (Kanu, 2011; Tuhiwai, 1999). In 2007 the OME offered a concentrated response to improve the educational experiences of Indigenous students in publicly funded schools by heightening attention to their unique learning styles and preferences (Cherubini, 2014). The various policy initiatives have identified the specific responsibilities of teachers, principals, school board administrators, and publicly elected trustees among others to address the epistemic needs of Indigenous learners and to foster their sense of engagement in public schools (Cherubini, 2018). The policies draw attention to the need to close the significant achievement gaps that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students across the province. My research examines the various policy directives and uses the OME policy framework objectives to gauge their success in the context of Indigenous peoples' direct experience in classrooms and schools. The outcome has included telling conversation that relates to the effectiveness of provincial education policy on the proverbial ground – students, families, and communities themselves.

The genuine engagement in such work is enriching and humbling. One is privy to the multidimensional understandings of education that often includes the juxtaposition of Indigenous knowledge and traditions and mainstream policies and practices. Equally significant, one cannot be anything but respectful when learning about the

historical challenges posed by formal education and the ripple effects that continue to implicate Indigenous students today. While I and those with whom I collaborate have written to the outcomes of the various community engagements we shared with Indigenous students and others, the current discussion aims instead to better understand the reflections of my own experiences as a teacher and settler-ally committed to critical approaches to education and bi-epistemic research.

Methodology:

I reflect upon the question that serves as the impetus for the research; specifically, how is the complexity of the aforementioned endeavors best captured and, in turn, can offer something of meaning to others? Autoethnography is a method where one's self-experiences, in this case as a teacher and researcher, can be examined (Henning, 2012; Hermann-Wilmarth & Bills, 2010; Woods, 2010). In this manner, the researcher assumes an active role in the examination of their own cultural narrative and, in the specific context of this investigation, I engage in a critical reflection of my position as it exists alongside my students and Indigenous colleagues (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). As the researcher, I rely on the logs I have recorded for nearly twenty years to engage in a narrative analysis of my own experience (Alvesson, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 1996). The intent is not to persuade the reader to accept a specific finding or outcome (Poerwandari, 2021), but instead to describe a certain phenomenon of experience whereby my reflection logs serve as the basis of the research data (Fasulo, 2015) in order to take advantage of what Ploder and Stadlbauer (2016) refer to as the epistemic power of the critical reflections so that they might resonate with readers' own experiences. Thus, self-observation and the reflection notes are the sources of data used for triangulation (McIlveen, 2008). The active and focused critical reflections on the data represent a meta-analysis that contributes to emerging patterns and themes (see Finlay, 2002). It is, according to Finlay (2002), a critical reflective process that includes "the situated and negotiated nature of the research encounter" (p. 215).

Moreover, and especially relevant to this analysis, it is a method, according to Hughes and Pennington (2016), that can exist beyond the boundaries that traditionally define social science research. Depending upon the pre-determined emphasis on oneself and relations to others, autoethnography can also include poetry as a means of self-expression. As one inclined to poetry, I choose to share my critical reflection through it.

As I examine the patterns emerging throughout the reflection logs, I notice both my intellectual and social engagement in the conversations with students and Indigenous community members. I note, throughout the data analysis, the exchange of concepts related to teaching, learning, schools, and schooling that on some occasions develop into novel ideas, and at other times become competing representations of learning and research. The patterns in the data underscore the social, cultural, and epistemic complexities of publicly funded classrooms, as they do Indigenous research and ways of knowing. The poetry that represents the discussion of this study points to the critical exploration of my and others' perceptions and beliefs as they exist across our respective cultural experiences. The poems emerged in the thinking and reflection about the data itself (DeVries, 2012) pointing to what is essentially an iterative process on new learning (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012). It is what Andreatta (2015) and others define as an imaginative-creative style of personal experience (see Chang, 2021; Gallardo et al., 2009; Spry, 2016).

Discussion:

Autoethnography allows me to interrogate lived experiences in the context of my teaching and of the bi-epistemic research with Indigenous colleagues. In the process I arrive at new expressions (Sikes, 2021). As I synthesize the observations made in the reflection logs, I perceive how my research has invited me to new spaces that also intersect with my role as teacher educator. In this role, I aim as well to encourage prospective teachers to consider difference in all its forms and intricacies:

> Creating an educative space
> To add value and relevance

To enlighten…
in situated spaces.
The unique sterility
of the classroom
Creative expression sitting shoulder to shoulder
With clinical conformity.
Resuscitating theory
that rests dormant in young minds
Positioning the possibility
of interpreting differently
Of understanding taken for granted assumptions.
To examine thinking
as expressions of arriving at knowledge.
Valuing the student experience to describe the
experience.
Offering them a premise
for consideration…
and for provoking thought.

Recognizing the competing interests of the digital
face
That glares in front of theirs.
Theory is presented …
in only necessary detail.
Students free to manipulate and interpret
perspective.
Some accept it
with expressionless focus.
Some note it
as a commodity –
a value limited
To the currency of assessment.
The insistence from the front
solicits attention.

It is the promotion of
knowledge exchange.
Legitimate and relevant.
Not exhaustive …
but a means of
further inquiry.
The invitation always extended.

Yet, a close reading of the reflection logs reveals that there is more to engaging in the space of knowledge exchange and academic inquiry – both for me as teacher and researcher and for the students. Assuming a critical lens is necessary to better appreciate the nuances of varying mindsets. Being critical means asking the tough questions and forcing one to be mindful of experience – one's own and that of others:

Theory is framed from

the position of experience
Experience and applicability …
to the real world.
To the world
outside the university classroom.
In the realm of professional and ethical standards.
In the creative tension
that exists behind
the Jungian mask.
Positioning new considerations framed in
contentious conversation.
For all stakeholders.
Across communities.
Of social and political challenges
Of marginalization.
Of partial inclusion.
What does it mean today?
For Indigenous learners …
Indigenous communities?
How does it implicate their response and interests?
Is it a mere disruption to an already accepted
stance?
Does it challenge their political interest?
Can it serve its intended purpose?

Though demanding and strenuous, the engagement in another's epistemic community has been most revealing. It has represented a challenge to stiff assumptions and preconceived notions of teaching, learning, collaboration, and research. It has troubled understandings of how education can serve to oppress those students that exist in the margins often described in public policy as achievement gaps, as if their truly diverse identities as First Peoples can be readily displaced by lifeless and quantifiable statistics. I try to make sense of the tensions:

The consumption of knowledge.
But whose?
Received, processed, and judged.
A dubious fate determined by
student agency.
The "Other" acknowledge perspective and
define its boundaries.
Its merit evaluated
on their subjective scales of
personal experience.
Its possibilities to exercise influence.
In consideration of the broader.
Its potential afforded opportunities to float

In the conceptual space of
the classroom.
Of the research.
For some, knowledge is an adequate measure.
In the development of
personal growth.
It has a hybrid intellectual standing – to imbalance
understanding
But in adequate measures?
Perhaps sustainable ones?

But we are reminded that the Indigenous peoples of
yesterday, today, and tomorrow
Have a unique threshold.
By virtue of their successful apprenticeships…in the
land…in the Spirit.
And by way of unique opportunities already
afforded.
Indigenous learners' identities …
Rooted in yesterday.
Nurture a presence that borrows from self-
projections of tomorrow.
Navigate the complex intersection of past, present,
and future.
Can be troubled by obligation.
And perplexed by stifling empowerment.
Indebted to something greater.
Maybe even over-indebted
to shifting identities.

Across many of the reflection logs are observations about Indigenous students and their communities' challenge to discover a sense of self in mainstream classrooms, hallways, and schools. Students recognize what they identify as their marginalization in these learning environments, but yet remain determined to locate themselves in the same realities of formal schooling that exist far beyond the classroom doors:

When recognition of a self is
an unsure alternative.
And when fueled ambitions transform into radical
measures.
The process of becoming carves a long-lasting
imprint
In the shifting sand.
It, like them,
takes on varying significance.
And can be misinterpreted to supplement
momentary purpose.
But one must become.
Tomorrow depends on it.

A learning space to foster self …
An informed sense equipped with new knowledge.
Allowing that self to occupy …
the classroom.
Teachers, too,
Will have to be aware.
Aware of the marginalized silent.
Honour what can be
active expressions
Of passive difference.
Recognize the stability of change.
Elaborate upon conclusive truths.
Shift swiftly between
embedded priorities.
Remain reflectively intentional
about practice.
Enlarge the scope of discovery
for all students.
Limit the stifling of
comprehensive approaches.
Willing to interrogate difference.
And refuse mediocrity.

But our collaborative research does not attempt to define anyone's experience as

it relates to formal education. It has been an experience of trying to understand distinction. Of how the same context of formal schooling can be experienced so differently. Striking throughout the reflection logs is how the engagement in this bi-epistemic research is, like education for some Indigenous peoples, a learned experience. Yet the nature of that learning has contradictory implications:

We try to define the approach
to research.
To research respectfully.
Among other objectives.
Of course.
And we try to understand
the approach to learning from them…
Those students that sit on the outside.
Of dominance.
Opportunities for new learning
are afforded.
Commonalities of
theoretical paradigms …
packaged.
Correct?
But how do we, and they,
abstract what is learned?

So very difficult to tailor solutions to an inexact
science.
Learning is not managed.
Yet we manage perspectives of what it means to
learn.
Of what it means to experience.
On some days we are invited
to consider the outliers.
You know, the issues beyond
the classroom walls
That cascade recklessly
into schooling.
We examine the costs incurred.
By the sometimes-recurring trends.
Instruction is scrutinized…must be.
The effectiveness of making
an impact.

We understand research to be relational. I notice the innumerous comments in the reflection logs about the priority of establishing good relations with colleagues. The research process depends upon it. I notice, too, that before all discussions regarding key findings and conclusions are the observations about being made to feel welcome by the communities. The soft and poignant words of the Elder that frames both our research approaches and our relationships. I think of these experiences in this way:

The fragile strength of words.
Necessary to our work …
it is the way we see each other.
We factor the limitations.
Of learners about learning …
of wisdom about knowing.
Of contemplating agency …
of thinking about thinking.
Of searching.
So very important
to consider experience.
Direct and indirect.
To contemplate a design of learning.
A means … not an end.

Conclusion:

The autoethnographic method allows for the critical reflection of the teaching, learning, and research journey through a vastly different lens than the more familiar quantitative and qualitative approaches. It positions me at the center of my own experience and forces unique considerations to better understand perspective. I see the journey in this way:

Cannot be a single-story narrative.
There is complexity
behind experience.
The aim to further cultivate …
To cultivate understanding
of realities …
Even of opinions.

The critical reflections, as presented in poetry, have provided me with some insight into the process of teaching and research as I am living it. It remains very much organic. Relations change and research questions fluctuate. There are inevitable aspects of the journey. Constant to the experience, though, is the significance of remaining reflective:

Navigating ideologies
and beliefs.
Being openly vulnerable
to unrealized expectations.
Recognizing experience.
First-person language.
Imagining a discourse …
of relevance.

Acknowledgments

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