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Academic Autoethnographies:
Becoming and being a teacher in
diverse higher education settings

Special Issue

Guest editors: Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan

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Editorial

Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan

More and more, higher education is being recultured in terms of competitive participation in the knowledge economy (Adkins, 2007). Consequently, many universities in South Africa and internationally are being reconfigured as “flexible business entities where academic activities are managed through strategic control and a focus on outputs which can be quantified and compared” (Reid, 2009, p.575). When the fundamental purpose of universities morphs into “business-ship” rather than “scholar-ship” (Teferra, 2014, paragraph 3), quantitative performance indicators become the standard against which academics are judged. A normative framing, coupled with invasive monitoring and often public shaming for not producing at or above the norm, can weaken or even extinguish vital scholarly attributes such as curiosity, passion, generativity and collegiality (Clare and Sivil, 2014; Maistry, 2015; Mayrath, 2008). As we face up to an increasingly likely scenario where higher education becomes “a mode of production, of goods and services, in which all the nonmaterial satisfactions that might come from work [are] eliminated” (Schwartz, 2014), academic autoethnographies offer possibilities for “critical interruptions” (Pezzullo, 2001, p.4) to corporate discourses that delimit understandings of what it can mean to become and be a teacher in higher education.

Autoethnography is a self-reflexive research genre in which the multifaceted, contingent self of the researcher becomes a lens through which to study interrelationships between personal autobiographies, lived experiences, and wider social and cultural concerns (Chang, 2008; Ellis and Adams, 2014; Grant, Short and Turner, 2013). As this special issue illustrates, notwithstanding the focus on the self or ‘auto’, autoethnography is not solipsistic or narcissistic (Pillay, Naicker and Pithouse-Morgan, in press). The articles in this themed issue reveal how autoethnography in higher education can “deepen and extend our understandings of lived educational experiences through the articulation and acknowledgment of how selves are sociocultural, political, and historical” (Pillay *et al.*, in press). Collectively, in these articles, we see how autoethnographies of becoming and being teachers in higher

education can offer socially useful insights into how we can “learn, cope and make our way” (Ellis and Adams, 2014, p.255) as teachers, academics, and researchers.

The special issue opens with Claudia Mitchell’s reflective essay on “*Hopefulness and Suspense in the Autoethnographic Encounters of Teaching in Higher Education*”. In this essay, she contemplates the potential contribution of autoethnography as offering “a place to locate and make sense of our experiences” in teaching in diverse higher education settings. Mitchell’s essay draws attention to the possibilities of autoethnography as a generative mode of what Webster-Wright (2009) has called “authentic professional learning, [which encourages] a spirit of critical inquiry where professionals can gain insight into their own learning and the assumptions they hold about their practice” (p.272). Mitchell proposes that taking an autoethnographic stance to our lives and work as university teachers can enable openness to critical “moments of learning (about ourselves and our students)”, with the aim of making a qualitative difference to our teaching and scholarship.

The four research articles that follow illustrate the educative and sociocultural significance of an autoethnographic stance to becoming and being a teacher in higher education. First, Nokhanyo Mayaba, an early career academic, describes how a retrospective autoethnographic reflection on her learning during her doctoral research allowed her to think critically about her own teaching and more broadly, about educational practices and perspectives in relation to children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC). Mayaba highlights how “using autoethnography as a reflective tool to explain [her] doctoral learning through creative ways indeed shifted [her] perspective about OVC and influenced [her] thinking as a teacher educator in higher education”. Next, Ronicka Mudaly explores her journey in academia as a junior, black female academic and reconsiders her academic self in relation to higher education institutional culture. She recounts how she was reduced to a ‘peripheral professional’ owing to a lack of adequate socialisation into the work of an academic, onerous workloads and performativity demands. Through self-reflexive, evocative accounts of her personal and interpersonal experiences, she makes visible how she productively resisted the prevailing institutional culture to become a ‘full member’ of the academic community. To follow, Keith Berry and Nathan Hodges work collaboratively to foreground the values of vulnerability, reflexivity and empathy in an autoethnographic account of their lived experiences of teaching an

undergraduate module on autoethnography. Berry and Hodges draw attention to the risks and benefits of vulnerability for both teachers and students and show how a vulnerable pedagogy can allow for a “dynamic uncovering of selves”, thus opening up “teaching as a site for inquiry”. Finally, Maistry, a senior academic, problematises a process of postgraduate supervision pedagogy in higher education. He draws on tenets of critical autoethnography to engage reflectively and reflexively with his practice as supervisor working with a diversity of postgraduate students. Through his personal reflexive account, Maistry illuminates his “heightened awareness and appreciation of the need to create enabling conditions for the intellectual development” of his students rather than being single-mindedly focused on a final technical product. An enhanced self-awareness of presence in the supervisory encounter invites him to reconsider his pedagogic stance in an endeavour to be more human in the supervisory encounter.

Taken as a whole, the articles in this special issue contribute to critical conversations about how and what we want to be as higher education teachers, in spite of or in response to those conditions produced by the design of institutions within which we live and work (Schwartz, 2014). The embodied and dynamic autoethnographic portrayals of higher education teachers show us that, although we might be surrounded by pervasive discourses that disembody and disconnect us as units ranked hierarchically, we can still choose to act with hope and to work in relationship with others.

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Hopefulness and suspense in the autoethnographic encounters of teaching in higher education

Claudia Mitchell

I remember hearing far off the sound of the tires of a car on the gravel of the long, straight, open road that my family always referred to as the 'main road'. This main road is some distance from our farm yard, connected by another long and very straight and open lane way. No trees or bushes or anything to block the view of the prairie expanse. For several minutes there is suspense. The tires offer a hopeful sound, breaking the silence, and breaking the monotony of the long summer day of a little girl who longs for something, anything, to happen. First the car is quite a way off. Then it sounds like it is slowing down – and I see that it is turning into our lane way. It stops there, and at that moment I am lost in anticipation. I don't recognize the car. Is it going to come up the lane or is the driver just turning around? Will there be the sound of the wheels speeding up, kicking up a little dust as it heads back down the main road towards town, or will the vehicle slowly make its way up the narrow passage of the lane way, towards the barn and house?

I offer this gravel road memory from my prairie childhood as an example of what might be termed 'the stuff' of autoethnography, evoking questions like: Where do I come from, how did I get here, and indeed, where is here? As Tony Kelly (2008) recounts so effectively in his autoethnography of teaching in a rural school in Nova Scotia, the question, "What are you doing here?" (p.9) is one that is laden with positionality. How do I, in this instance, anticipate the unknown and how do I position myself and the events as hopeful? In this brief essay I consider the role of autoethnography in 'being' and 'becoming' in our teaching in diverse higher education settings. My own settings are, in and of themselves, diverse, ranging from my full-time work at a large university in a cosmopolitan city in Canada to being a teacher (at least on a part-time basis) in universities in Sweden, Ethiopia and South Africa – and, most recently, at another Canadian university on its west coast. Following from Appiah's (2006) notion of cosmopolitan citizenship, I find myself, like many of my academic colleagues in South Africa and elsewhere,

with opportunities to travel to and interact with students and peers in countries that I would never have dreamt of visiting, let alone working in, all those years ago, growing up on farm in the middle of the Canadian prairies in the 1950 and early 1960s, and listening attentively to the sound of the tires on the gravel road.

As diverse as the settings are, each setting in itself is filled with diversity. The postgraduate course at that west coast Canadian university where I am teaching as I write this, and which draws on the tools of visual autoethnography as central to the course, includes several students from Iran, another from Korea, a student whose mother gets on a boat in Vietnam in 1979 and hopes she will reach Thailand and then Canada, a student from Hong Kong, another from Chile, one from Russia, and a student whose grandparents make their way to the Canadian west from Scotland – but then, alongside these geographic divisions, there are different cultural and experiential divisions that frame the diversity as they arrive at class each day. Several students have very young children and so must always be thinking of childcare and picking up children, a couple are teachers who are preparing for their own diverse school settings that will start up again in a few weeks and so they have a common interest in how they will apply the assignments and so on. How do we anticipate the unique and diverse circumstances of our teaching? What does an autoethnographic stance allow us to do? What difference can the memory of the gravel road, in my case, make to how I approach my teaching, my students, my colleagues and my research? How is it that what I might describe as a memory of convenience allows me to account for what I now want to write about, and how is it a piece of writing that helps me to make meaning of what is, it turns out, a critical feature of my teaching?

There are at least three main points that seem to me to be central to autoethnography in addressing diversity in higher education. The first is in relation to what I call the act of commitment, or consciously doing, telling, and crafting meanings in relation to our teaching experiences. The phenomenologist Max Van Manen is well known for the idea of writing as research where the “writing is the writing” (1990, p.92). I would add to this the idea that it is also the looking at, showing of, and talking about, for example, personal photographs or creating an artistic piece about our own practice that can also contribute to the act of commitment in autoethnographic research. The memory of the sounds of the car tires on the gravel road has been with me for years and I have referred to this memory on several

occasions. I have used it to talk about the sheer boredom of growing up on a farm (versus the romantic ideal of rurality), to account for the ways that I embrace novelty and travel as perhaps a key aspect of my *modus operandi*, and to think, of course, about sound itself in our research sees as a multisensory component of our existence (Pink, 2015) and one that should not be overshadowed by the visual.

A second point relates to vulnerability. As I write this essay, several of my doctoral students are in the final hours of completing their own autoethnographies that are also related to higher education. These are moments of vulnerability, both in relation to what they are writing about (themselves and their own teaching), and in relation to the fact that they must put this work out for examination. My work by comparison seems much less vulnerable – but nonetheless it constantly reminds me to ask the question: How can we possibly support this kind of work if we not do it ourselves, and if we do not make ourselves vulnerable? In part it relates to how we respond to the autoethnographic work of our postgraduate students. How do we, often as the first readers of this work, take this vulnerability into account? There are many different aspects of diversity, ranging from race, class, sexual orientation, gender, geography and so on. How do we ask questions that do not close down what are often very revealing aspects of our students' lives? This is of course a critical issue in South Africa, where there remain many racial imbalances, but race is only one part of this, and as I have noted above, diversity embraces many different features of our work.

A third point relates to hopefulness and suspense and the need to use an autoethnographic stance in opening up our teaching. Here the writing about the tires on gravel seems now to capture metaphorically something of the essence of addressing diversity – the unknown, the anticipation, the suspense that in a sense comes with the beginning days of every new course that we might teach. There is never a time that is quite like the beginning, and quite as dreaded as those first days of teaching a new group of students, for me and for many of my colleagues; I take this up elsewhere (Mitchell and Weber, 1999). It is in part because we have no idea what is going to happen. The car at the end of the lane way may indeed speed away, but what if it does turn in? How prepared are we to greet the car, its driver and its passengers?

I used to think of this hopefulness and suspense stance, as I think I could call it, as somewhat haphazard: whatever happens, happens. However, as I work more with autoethnography in my own teaching, I am coming to realize that

this stance allows us the luxury of finally having a place to locate and make sense of our experiences. As Kathleen Stewart observes, “Auto-ethnography can be a way of doing something different with theory and its relation to experience” (2013, p.659). For example, we might study the responses, both formal and informal, that we receive about our own teaching from former students or even from other faculty members. This could, on the one hand, be read as some version of the question: How did my teaching have an influence on you? Indeed this is a legitimate question in self-study (see for example, Whitehead, 1989). On the other hand, and I think that is what this piece has helped me to frame, is the recognition of the patterns and shapes of those responses. Just as I was compiling this article, one of my former students, now an accomplished playwright, whom I taught when she was in junior high school in rural Nova Scotia a number of decades ago, sent me a piece that she had published in *Brick Books*, a literary arts magazine. In it she writes wonderfully glowing comments about the impact of my teaching on her writing.

“That first day she introduced herself as she wrote Ms. Mitchell on the board (Ms!—none of our mothers were Ms.) then whirling around she asked, *Does anyone here write POETRY?* The way she said *POETRY* made my heart bump against my chest. Before I could put my hand up the class show-off answered, in a tone dripping with disdain, *Cathy Banks does*. All heads turned in my direction as Ms. Mitchell, beaming, strode down the aisle to my desk. *Ms. Banks*, she said, *I would love to read your poems!*

For the next two years I dropped newly minted poems on her desk once or twice a week. She never made positive or negative comments about my half-baked poems (make no mistake I was a very bad poet) she simply treated each adolescent attempt as a poem. She was not the teacher but the reader and I was not the student but the poet.

Ms. Mitchell never suggested that I cut or change a line or even a word. My poems reminded her of the works of Margaret Atwood, Al Purdy, Earle Birney, Alden Nowlan, P.K. Page, Margaret Avison, Jay Macpherson to name a few. Her response never varied excepting only the name of the poet. She would take me aside in the hall and say, *Thank you for your poem Ms. Banks it reminded me of Margaret Atwood’s work (or Nowlan, Birney, Page) have you ever read Margaret Atwood (or Purdy, Avison, Macpherson)?* Of course I hadn’t, so, she would bring me books of poems from her own library and

thereby introduced me to the works of many of the contemporary Canadian poets of the 1960s.” (Banks, 2015, p.1)

Needless to say I was very moved by this writing, recognizing, of course, that I was also benefitting from the superb writing skills of this former student who has gone on to win the Governor General’s award for her plays twice in the last five years. When a former doctoral student who is now a teaching colleague asked to read the piece from *Brick Books*, she responded with the following.

“Fast forward a few years and many of us at McGill could write a similar homage, though perhaps not as poetically. She identifies immediately the qualities of openness, innovation and what-the-heck-let’s-try-it-and-see-how-it-goes that characterize your teaching (oh, self-proclaimed “I hate teaching” person). The setting of the table for your students to partake of the feast of learning and doing”. (Personal communication, August 18, 2015)

Of course not all my former students look at me this way. A dear colleague and former Chair of my department recently recounted how he had to review, as part of his duties as Chair, student evaluations of courses. One, he recalls, of my teaching was from a student who commented that I am given to talking in such a way that I seem to lose my train of thought but that fortunately I always picked up on another train that was going the same way. My reading on these different observations supports the hopefulness and suspense stance, and, at the same time, highlights the place of autoethnography in teaching. How else does one begin to name one’s experiences and, even more critically, see the shape of things?

The richness of the diversity of our classrooms – in South Africa and Canada – is not just about the idea of the inclusive curriculum, though that, of course, is a necessary starting point. We cannot (and should not) be able always to predict what is going to work. There should be some suspense. What we can do is commit ourselves to identifying the moments of learning (about ourselves and our students), and recognize the impact of this work on our teaching and scholarship.

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‘Shifting perspectives’: an autoethnographic account of how my learning as a doctoral candidate influenced my thinking as a teacher educator

Nokhanyo Mayaba

Abstract

My journey of becoming a teacher educator in a university has been influenced by the learning gleaned from doing a doctoral study. The experience that I had whilst working with children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC) changed my perspective as I discovered and learnt about their innate potential. In this article I provide an autoethnographic account of how my learning as a doctoral candidate impacted on the way I think about teaching pre-service teachers who will in turn teach in diverse contexts. I support my insights by data from my reflective journal, drawings and collages. I explain how Sen’s capability framework helped me to make sense of my learning. My autoethnographic reflective narrative has implications for how teacher educators might reconsider their practice to help pre-service teachers to think critically about their ideas and practice in relation to OVC.

Introduction

My journey of becoming a teacher in a higher education institution has been influenced by a number of factors, one being the learning gleaned from doing a doctoral study. In my study I worked with children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC) (Mayaba, 2013). This experience totally changed my perspective. Instead of viewing these children as objects of pity, I learnt to respect their resilience and I discovered their innate potential. As a black woman I thought I understood the lived experiences of vulnerable black children, but I learnt that I had no real idea of the personal and ecological assets in their lives. I then wondered how my (mostly white, middle class) student teachers who may not have been exposed to the lives of children in poor communities might perceive them and how this might affect their teaching. My study prompted me to think about how I could help pre-service

teachers to recognise and develop the potential of all children, including OVC.

In this article, I provide an autoethnographic account (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) of how my learning as a doctoral candidate impacted on the way I think about teaching pre-service teachers who will in turn teach in diverse and socio-economically challenged contexts. I first provide background to set the scene for this article, and then describe my doctoral study. This is followed by a discussion on autoethnography as a research methodology. Thereafter I present a narrative of my doctoral journey of learning. I go on to describe how the capability framework (Sen, 1999) helped me to make sense of this narrative. I explain how my learning impacted on my thinking about how I could adapt my teaching to help pre-service student teachers to think critically about their own ideas and practice. To conclude, I reflect on how autoethnography as a reflective tool enabled me to recognise and explain my doctoral learning through creative means.

Background

I am a teacher educator who has been working in one of the universities in the Eastern Cape for nine years. I spent three of those years in academic administration, co-coordinating teaching of language education modules for various education programmes in off-campus centres. My role in these programmes was to: develop, revise and write study guides; train tutors who were teaching these modules; set examination papers; and moderate the marking of examination papers. When I began my doctoral journey, I had just been appointed in a permanent position as a lecturer in the Faculty of Education. This was not my first teaching experience as I was a high school teacher for eight years before I joined the university.

When I was appointed on a permanent basis, I taught a module titled 'Inclusive Education and Barriers to Learning' to third year Bachelor of Education (Foundation phase) students who were training to teach Grades R–3. This module explored the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to barriers to learning in an inclusive classroom. One of the sections in this module dealt with family structures and their effect on learners' success in learning. Obviously, family structures as a possible learning barrier were covered, such as children who grow up in single-parent households, foster

families, child headed households and orphans (Pienaar, 2013). What drew my attention to my teaching of this particular section was the realisation that the family structures of children that were being discussed in my module were similar to the participants in my doctoral study, who were children who had been orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC). I became uncomfortable with the way these children were portrayed in the literature in my module which only focused on the risk factors they encountered in life whereas the data generated by the children in my study revealed more positive stories about their lives.

Before I began with my study I also had a stereotypical belief of who OVC were. Growing up, there were assumptions in my black community that these children were poor, marginalised, incapable and in dire need of help. However, as I began to engage with my research data, I noted how my own beliefs and common knowledge were challenged. I also noted my own sense of ambivalence about what I was reading and teaching about OVC, compared to what my data were revealing about them. Hence in this article I ask: how can I help student teachers to recognise and develop the potential in all the children they teach?

My doctoral study

In order to put the reader in the picture, it is important that I give a brief overview of my doctoral study. I conducted an action research study which aimed to explore and describe how folktales might be used to enhance resilience in children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC) and how these stories might be used by teachers to reach both their pastoral and academic goals. Action research is defined as “a cyclical process of action and reflection on and in action which integrates theory and practice, research and development” (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011, p.6). The point of departure in action research is a concern or problem (Wood, Morar and Mostert, 2008). Therefore the problem that I identified from literature was that there was prevalence of OVC in South African schools who needed care and support (Smart, 2003; De Witt and Lessing, 2010) and that teachers perceived themselves as untrained for this pastoral role (Ogina, 2010) and considered it to be an added responsibility to their already existing curriculum requirements. In most South African schools there are no referral options as there are no social workers or psychologists (Pillay and Di Terlizzi, 2009). I

asked myself how teachers could support children to better cope in the face of adversity in a way that could be easily integrated into the academic curriculum so as to minimise the perceived burden of care and support.

This study was underpinned by the social ecological view of resilience (Ungar, 2011) which emphasises that social ecologies such as schools have a duty to facilitate children's positive adjustment to adversity. The choice of folktales was influenced by the importance that resilience theory attaches to cultural variables in the resilience process (Mayaba and Wood, 2015). The participants in this study were twenty two (n=22) isiXhosa speaking OVC between the ages of 9–14 years who either lived in a children's home or with foster parents. I purposefully selected OVC because the intention of this study was to explore ways in which they can be supported as a response to literature that reveals how teachers are struggling to find ways of supporting the increasing number of such children.

In the first cycle of the study I generated data with children who lived in a children's home. The process of research required that I tell them one folktale a week over a period of 24 weeks without any interaction with the story. Before and after the storytelling sessions they had to draw and explain how they viewed their lives. Based on the findings and reflections on the first cycle, in the second cycle children had to select stories that they liked and then engage with them using drawings, collage and drama. The details of the findings of this study are documented in Wood, Theron and Mayaba (2012a) and in Mayaba and Wood (2015). This article draws from my doctoral study which met ethical requirements; therefore any concern about the consent from participants would be invalid. As much as the caregiver had given her consent to this research I was aware of the importance of the children's assent to the research; hence before I embarked on the research process I explained to the children the purpose and the process of the study.

In the next section of the article I discuss my journey of learning by reflecting on some of the moments that changed my own thinking about the children who participated in my doctoral study. Thereafter I analyse my learning by using the capability framework as a lens to consider how I might help pre-service student teachers to think critically about their own ideas and practice.

Autoethnography as a research methodology

Autoethnography as a research methodology (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Wall, 2006, Duarte, 2007, Méndez, 2013) seemed appropriate to help me reflect on how my learning as a doctoral candidate impacted on my thinking about teaching in higher education. I always wanted to write about my own learning and research experiences in a way that could be acknowledged as a contribution to knowledge. An autoethnographic approach affords me freedom to explain my learning through creative ways of reflecting on my experiences (Duarte, 2007). I was part of a reality and I always felt that I needed to share my experience the way I thought about and viewed it, through producing a narrative, which is a personal story that draws on experiences (Wall, 2006) and how such experiences have transformed my way of thinking (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Duarte, 2007; Mcilveen, 2008, Méndez, 2013). In this article I present this narrative and illustrate it with data about my thoughts and feelings (Tenni, Smyth and Boucher, 2003). I use reflections from my doctoral research journal in which I captured moments of epiphany during my interaction with the children along with drawings (Özden, 2009) and collage (Williams, 2002). Using arts based methods such as drawings and collages enabled me to illustrate the changes in my thinking during my research journey and to also make meaning of my experiences since they serve as a stimulus, guide and scaffold for one's thoughts (Özden, 2009).

An important feature of autoethnography is that researchers differ in their emphasis of the self (auto), culture (ethno) and the application of the research process (graphy) (Reed-Danahay, in Holt, 2003). In my case, I am writing retrospectively and selectively (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) about my learning emanating from my interaction with children in a specific culture (context of poverty and vulnerability) and then analysing using the capability framework (Sen, 1999) how these experiences impacted on my thinking about teaching pre-service teachers who will in turn teach in diverse and socio-economically challenged contexts. Robeyns (2005, p.94) describes the capability approach as “an evaluative and assessment framework for individual's well-being which focuses on what they are able to do and be, on the quality of their life and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life they value”.

Using this particular lens to analyse autoethnographic data allowed me as a researcher to engage more deeply with data generated during my doctoral

study (Tennie *et al.*, 2003). Tennie *et al.*, (2003, p.4) further advise that in order to have quality and rigour “when working with one’s own autobiographical data there is a need to engage in external dialogue with others and anyone else who could be pinned down and who will listen”. Coia and Taylor (2009, p.8) refer to this engagement process as “co/autoethnography” in which two people reflect on a particular phenomenon collaboratively. Since I can claim that my doctoral supervisor and I have a professional, friendly, mentoring relationship and I am open to learning, she was able to critique and challenge me to deepen my thoughts about the narrative presented in this article.

Autoethnography requires the researcher to use ‘I’ in writing one’s narrative, which “enables his/her voice to be heard” (Méndez, 2013, p.282). In my view, using autoethnography is like telling ‘my own story within a story’. Admittedly, I have been writing articles that conform to qualitative approaches. However, although I have used ‘I’ in reporting my findings (the other story), I never told ‘my own story’, which is something which autoethnography affords me the opportunity to do. I agree with Ellis’s (2007) assertion that autoethnography itself is an ethical practice as it entails being ethical and honest about the events described. In composing my narrative the events described were based on my experiences as a lecturer and a PhD candidate. I taught the module I referred to in this article and in my PhD, which got ethical clearance, participants were indeed OVC. The focus of the narrative presented in the following section of the article is on my transformation and my thinking about what I learnt during my doctoral study and how this impacted on my becoming a teacher and teaching in a higher institution.

An autoethnographic narrative of my journey of learning

My experience of generating data in a children’s home and with OVC changed the way I thought about my participants and how they live their lives. This experience also impacted on how I think about my own teaching. As a black person growing up in rural communities, I had always embraced the script that by default I was marginalized. I never thought that as black children in rural ecologies we were experts and agents of our own learning and that our wealth of resources and expertise resided and were embedded in

the complexity of the rural ecology. However, I am grateful that my parents valued education and were able to put aside money to pay for my university education to study to become a teacher. As indicated earlier, I taught in a rural high school for eight years before I joined the university. During my years in that school, I became aware of learners' diverse backgrounds and the factors that affected their success in learning. Many learners lived with their grandparents since their parents had passed on as a result of HIV and AIDS. At the time there were no support structures at my school for children who were orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS. Twelve years later, when my doctoral supervisor invited me to be part of the 'Read me to resilience project' (Wood, Theron and Mayaba, 2012b) one of my siblings had just been diagnosed with HIV. She was very sick and I was taking care of her. I thought about what was going to happen to her child should anything bad happen to her. For the first time I read a lot about HIV and AIDS and also about the lives of children whose parents die as a result of this pandemic.

During the fieldwork for my doctoral study, I realised that what I thought I knew about OVC and their experiences was limited. My fieldwork experiences also reminded me of the time I was a teacher in high school in the rural areas and made me more conscious of how I had never thought about the significance of getting to know my learners. This made me realise that as a teacher educator who is preparing teachers who will in turn teach in diverse school contexts, I needed to rethink how I could help my students to be able to think critically about their own constructions of OVC and poor communities.

As I indicated earlier, all the children in my study were isiXhosa home language speakers. IsiXhosa is one of the indigenous languages in South Africa. I identify myself as an isiXhosa first language speaker and so I felt it was going to be easy to be immersed in the children's space since I assumed there would be no language barriers. I learnt from the caregiver that these children mostly came from nearby rural and township areas. Growing up in rural areas myself in an extended family of mother, father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and siblings, I knew that it was not going to be difficult for me to adjust to a home where there were a lot of children and adults. At the same time, I was carrying stereotypical images of children's homes: children under strict control, a place where there is no fun and a lot of chaos. I did not have evidence of this situation but interestingly, I somehow imagined a children's home as a very restricted place. Moreover, I had read literature stating that OVC are exposed to risk factors (Ritcher, 2004). A risk factor is

any situation that threatens healthy development (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch and Ungar, 2005). I also read that children who are sent to residential care or children's homes are reported to be not fully developed socially, as they often find it difficult to adjust to life outside these institutions (Phiri and Webb, 2002). The following drawing depicts my thoughts about the children's home and OVC at that time.



Figure 1: Drawing of what I thought I knew about children in children's homes

This picture depicts that as an educated teacher educator who has read a lot of books about the OVC and their lives, I felt that I knew everything that I needed to know and therefore was not expecting to gain any new information. The different bubbles represent different aspects which influenced my thinking: my sense of marginalisation; the literature that I had read and was teaching; my status as a teacher educator – a knower – and my own imagination.

However, on the first day I visited the children's home I noted how different the situation was. Whilst standing at the gate waiting for someone to open for me I noticed children were playing outside. Later on, I noted in my journal:

The children's home doesn't look like how I imagined it. There are two huge houses facing each other, perhaps, one of them is for boys and the other one for girls. Or one belongs to the caregiver and volunteers and the children share rooms in the other big house. I was surprised that the caregiver told me that students from the university and surrounding communities often visit the home to play with the children or to teach them a sport like chess. It's interesting that the girls were playing 'unophuce' and others 'ugqaphu'. They look happy and carefree unlike the children that I imagined in a children's home (March, 2009).

The sight of these children playing traditional games took me back to the time I was a young girl. I also played these games. I remembered very well how much I enjoyed playing 'unophuce'. (This is a game in which one either draws a circle or digs a hole on the ground and places about ten little stones therein. One then has to remove the stones inside the circle one by one by throwing a bigger stone in the air whilst taking out the others. In this game you have to take out all ten stones at first and return nine, thereafter, you take out all and return eight and so on.) In hindsight, I realise that *unophuce* was a counting game, which enhanced our thinking ability, as well as being a lot of fun. To me this meant that as much as we were in rural communities, our learning was not only shaped by what was taught at school but also by the indigenous games that we participated in. As a teacher educator, I realised that it is important for me to expose my Foundation phase pre-service teachers to such games as methods they could use to teach in their classrooms.

When I got inside the house, what drew my attention were the many trophies and framed achievement certificates that were displayed on top of the sideboard. I also noticed a lot of photographs that were pasted on the walls. These photographs reflected the many events that children engage in, for example, birthday parties and 'braais' (a South African name for a barbecue). Since the venue for storytelling was one of the bedrooms, I saw how neat the bedrooms were and later on I found out that children had routines for household chores. I was a bit concerned about the fact that eight children shared a room, I remember noting in my journal:

Sometimes when I am at home, I think about them, I always wonder how they feel, whether they are happy in the children's home. . . .how it feels to share a room with eight other children (Author, 2012a, p.134).

I was however taken aback by the positive atmosphere and fun that permeated that home. I literally felt love and compassion for these children. The following drawing represents the change in my view of my participants.

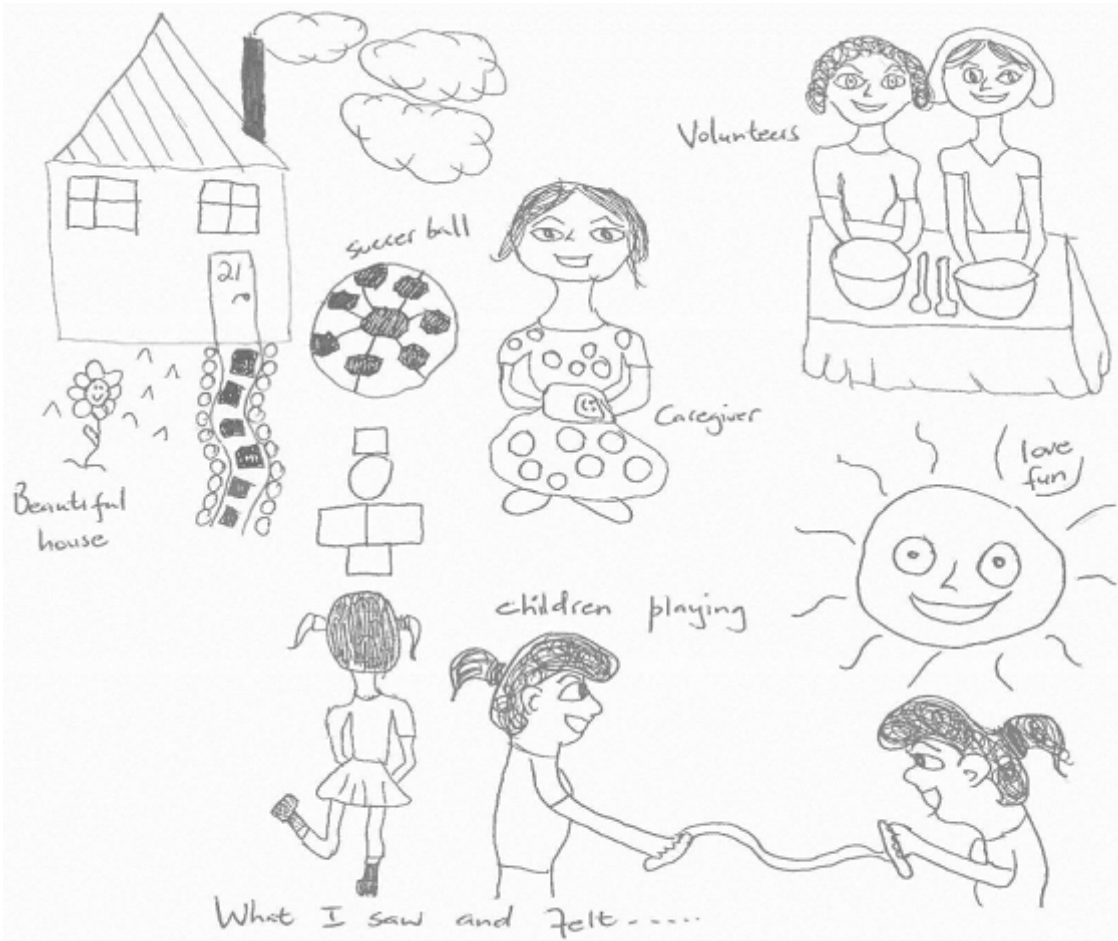


Figure 2: Drawing about what I learnt about children in children’s home

This drawing represents a sense of love and peace that I felt permeating that home. I noticed a number of resilience enhancing factors (Ungar, 2011), such as good relationships with the caregiver, peers and people from the community. Children displayed a sense of happiness and contentment and there were other people from the community who volunteered to cook and others were assisting children with homework. Moreover, during the study children described themselves as developing well, participating in various sporting activities and having good relationship with the caregiver (Mayaba, 2013). I also noted during my visits that they had access to material resources such as TV and radio; they also had support from community members who

assisted them with homework and hosted birthday parties for them. Faith based organisations also provided spiritual encouragement to these children.

In my doctoral study I was investigating the resilience potential of folktales and, in hindsight, I noted that this linked well with a section in my teacher education module which addressed social issues that are barriers to learning. I realised that in my module students were not referred to cultural assets that exist in learners' ecologies as means to address some of the barriers to learning. My teaching experience and qualifications are in language education. Therefore I know the educative power of reading and storytelling (Parkinson, 2009). As a child I also experienced first-hand being told traditional stories by my grandparents and parents. I know how much I enjoyed these stories and how they fired my imagination. Admittedly, I did not think further about folktales when I was a teacher and before I did my doctoral study. The following collage depicts my fears and scepticism about using folktales at the start of my doctoral study.



Figure 3: Collage depicting my fears and scepticism

What distinguishes folktales from other stories is that they are generally stories about the world of imagination, about animals and humans with supernatural powers and abilities like fairies (Zin and Nasir, 2007; Parkinson,

2009). I was sceptical about how children would react to these stories since I was aware that nowadays children mostly watch television and folktales are no longer part of the traditional culture. My fears were influenced by my experience of collecting these stories from the community members. As part of the research process I had to approach community members to tell me folktales they had heard as children that made them feel strong or ‘enabled’ (Mayaba, 2013; Mayaba and Wood, 2015). Most people were surprised that somebody was interested in folktales. However, my father was so excited when I asked him to tell me some of the folktales. Unfortunately he did not live long enough for me to tell him more about what I achieved through my study. My father was a history teacher; a political science honors graduate, and later on a reverend in an Anglican church. He was one person who always reminded us as children how important it was to value cultural assets, but as we became older we forgot about his teachings.

Figure 4 below captures my experience of telling folktales at the children’s home.



Figure 4: Collage depicting my positive experience about telling folktales

Contrary to my fears and doubts, the twenty two participants at the children’s home attended all the storytelling sessions. Although I told the stories in a

non-participative way since I was exploring if merely telling them would develop resilience, I could tell from their facial expressions that they were enjoying the stories. Moreover, whenever I came to the home they would be singing some of the story songs. The caregiver also told me during informal chats that the children were retelling the stories to one another at night. Children also asked me why I was telling folktales during the day because tradition dictates that if you tell a folktale during the day you will grow a horn. This is the indigenous knowledge that I also knew so I had to assure them that nothing was going to happen to them. This was interesting to me as I initially thought that children might think that telling folktales was old fashioned and they might not know any cultural beliefs about these stories. When I used folktales in a participative and educative manner in the second cycle, I noticed that children were having fun and could recall the stories. As Tobin and Snyman (2008) mention, stories tend to stick in the mind longer than abstract ideas alone.

The findings of my doctoral study (Wood, Theron and Mayaba, 2012a; Mayaba and Wood, 2015) made me realise the value of cultural assets to empower vulnerable children and make a practical contribution to improving the quality of life for children. I also became aware of how cultural assets could help teachers to make a difference, therefore making a contribution in terms of eventual social change. I grew as a teacher educator as I learnt through this study how I could help my students to develop children's resilience. I was excited about the possibility that folktales could be used in a classroom situation to meet the requirements of the curriculum as well as to encourage the development of resilience in children. I am aware that nowadays these stories are in an adapted and animated form and that many children do not have access to the original oral version of these stories (Mayaba and Wood, 2015). This means that if schools could work collaboratively with community members by inviting them to tell stories, children's positive coping responses could be enhanced. This also means that since teachers are overworked and stressed and may not find the time to engage children in participative activities around stories, folktales could be a very powerful tool that could be used and take up no more than 10 minutes in a teaching day. This has implications for me as a teacher educator in terms of how I think about cultural assets as a resource for learning that could be used by pre-service and in-service teachers in their classrooms.

Making sense of my learning using the capability framework

In thinking about my experience during my doctoral research fieldwork, I drew from Sen's (1999) capability approach to help me clarify my thoughts on how I could adapt my teaching to help the student teachers to think critically about their own ideas and practice. A core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on the actual opportunities a person has, namely their functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1999, Wilson-Strydom, 2011; Hick, 2012). 'Functionings' refer to things that a person is able to be or do whereas 'capability' is the ability to achieve and the freedom a person has to enjoy valuable functionings (Wilson-Strydom, 2011).

Contrary to my earlier assumptions about the lives of the OVC and the children's home as a restricted area, I learnt that OVC have the ability to achieve and have ample opportunities to nurture their talents not only at school, but among themselves and with community members. This implies that as a teacher educator I need to conscientise pre-service teachers of their own potential as agents of change and how their perceptions about vulnerable children can either support or hinder these children's success in school and in life in general. This supports the view that Sen's work is underpinned "by seeing each person and each life as valuable and of moral concern and not a means to some end" (Walker, 2010, p.491). In my view teachers have a responsibility to bring about change in the schools where they will be teaching through their own initiatives of responding positively to the challenges they might experience in such schools. This means I also have a responsibility to help my students to acquire knowledge that is based on various perspectives on the issue at hand. Contextual realities they might face are learners who: have experienced the loss of one or both parents; are neglected, destitute, abandoned or abused; have a parent or guardian who is ill; have suffered increased poverty levels; have been the victims of human rights abuses; or are HIV positive themselves (Smart, 2003, p.viii). Based on the capabilities lens (Sen, 1999), teachers should not measure the well-being of children based on their 'means of living' but should focus on what they can be and the opportunities they can have to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

I also learnt that there is an urgent need for debates to demystify vulnerability, which is a complex concept. Focusing only on the negative aspects of children

being vulnerable may perpetuate stereotypes and the dominant scripts that describe the well-being of these children. For instance, research shows that a number of these children come from families who depend on grants and pensions for survival. As a result, when their parents die, these children have nothing to inherit (Ainsworth and Filmer, 2002; UNICEF, 2004). In the capability approach, one would first determine the measurements for poverty before deciding on the context (Hick, 2012). Second, one would have to “evaluate well-being in terms of what people value being and doing, and to increase their freedom to be in those ways or to do those things” (Walker and McLean, 2010, p.850). Poverty is viewed as “deprivation of certain basic capabilities” (Hick, 2012, p.3). This means capability to experience a good quality life, might in fact not have much to do with economic wealth. My data and observations showed that the children who participated in my study are well taken care of and have clothing and shelter. Therefore as a teacher educator I need to be in a position to engage in discussions with my students and fellow colleagues on what vulnerability is and what the concept might mean to pre-service teachers.

From my doctoral study I have come to recognise that cultural assets can shape and contribute towards a sustainable learning environment. Some of my pre-service teachers might be employed in schools where there are few material resources. Therefore it is important that they are aware of the existing assets in the communities in which their learners reside which they can tap into as a resource for teaching and learning. Instead of viewing poor contexts as a deficit they could realise that there are existing strengths that are rooted in those communities. As teachers they need to be capable of finding ways to bring those resources and assets into the classroom context for the benefit of the children they are teaching. As the capability framework also addresses the issues of injustice, especially in marginalised communities (Robeyns, 2005), I believe that it would be unjust to ignore the resources that marginalised communities have at their disposal (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2012), in this case, traditional folktales. Using folktales as a stimulus for interactive pedagogical strategies could enable teachers to gain deeper insight into the reality of the lives of children in their care (Mayaba and Wood, 2015) and help to identify pastoral needs that could be addressed through providing access to support structures (Ogina, 2010). Therefore I learnt that I need to create a space for my pre-service teachers to think creatively about how they could support learners who live in poor communities.

Sen's (1999) capability approach recognises individuals as agents of change and participants in economic, social and political actions. Looking at my journey of learning through this framework also helped me to grow personally. Having realised that teachers are agents of change, I also thought about how I could be an agent of change in the home and the schools where I generated my data. My experiences during the fieldwork ignited a sense of compassion and love for the children that I was generating data with. I thought about how I could contribute and make a difference in their lives. Hence I was able to establish a reading club at the home and secure a sponsorship of 100 story books which were in isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans. When I started off with the reading club I invited my friends to volunteer and we would read stories to and with the children every Sunday afternoon. I would often invite my cell group members from my church to volunteer to clean the houses at the home. What I learnt from this experience led me to establish another reading home in another children's home in the city. I have also built very good relationships with the caregivers. We got to know one another and it was interesting to realise that we all had stories of resilience to tell even though we lived in different areas of the city and had different backgrounds. I realised that these stories could motivate my student teachers to persevere in schools and aim towards making a positive impact in children's lives. An extract from my journal reads as follows:

Having been at the children's home, it was going to be impossible for me to not give back to the children as they taught me a lot about who they were. I am a changed person and I no longer judge situations especially when I don't know anything about those situations. Although it has not been a smooth journey but there are substantial and significant lessons that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Thank you Les for inviting me to this project (July, 2012).

In my journey of becoming a teacher educator, I had to shift my perspective about OVC and their lives and find a way of communicating my findings to the pre-service teachers that I teach. I believe that teaching is a learning experience where students and I embark on a journey of discovery and engagement that is characterised by exchange and sharing of ideas and expressions of individual perceptions and beliefs about the topic under discussion. In this process, I recognise that both the students and I bring different knowledge and draw from different experiences and backgrounds in relation to what is learned during lectures. I am therefore always open to possibilities of disagreements about certain issues. Hence I encourage critical engagement that is conducted with respect. The journey of learning continues and I hope during the redesign process of the Inclusive Education and Barriers

to Learning module, I will be able to share with my colleagues my autoethnographic story and the lessons learnt during my doctoral journey.

Conclusion

In this article I presented an autoethnographic narrative on my personal experience of how my learning as a doctoral student impacted my thinking about teaching in higher education. I supported my insights with data from my reflective journal, drawings and collages I made to help me clarify my thinking. I used Sen's (1999) capability framework as a lens to make sense of my learning. I learnt that I can help student teachers to recognise and develop the potential in the children they teach by conscientising them of their potential as agents of change, engaging them in discussions that will focus on the positive aspects of OVC and make them aware of the existing assets in children's ecology.

What I learnt from my doctoral journey will help me to better equip pre-service teachers to unlock and tap into the creativity of children from poor diverse contexts. I now realise the importance of understanding children's social realities as the foundation for planning any module that will address diverse family structures or social factors that are barriers to learning. I am not disputing the needs of OVC, but am advancing an argument that there is a more positive side to the story that pre-service teachers can be exposed to. The insights that I gained from my journey both confirmed and contradicted literature I had read about OVC. I found that the children who participated in my study were generally happy and enjoyed good relations with their caregivers, in contradiction to literature that positions OVC as vulnerable to abuse by caregivers (UNAIDS, 2010). Although OVC are exposed to risk factors, as discussed in literature, it is important to also note that such adversity can be an antecedent to the development of resilience. As a former teacher and a teacher educator, I now better understand the role played by children's ecologies in shaping their lives. I feel proud that my study could contribute to the discussions and debates taking place in teacher and teacher education forums on OVC. Moreover, using autoethnography as a reflective tool to explain my doctoral learning through creative ways indeed shifted my perspective about OVC and influenced my thinking as a teacher educator in higher education.

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Creating my academic self and space: autoethnographic reflections on transcending barriers in higher education

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Abstract

This article focuses on my ethnographic self-reconstruction in order to explore my academic journey, by critically evaluating the influence of professional academic cultures on my teaching practice, with a view to understanding my professional identity. I make visible to the reader and myself my suppressed feelings, emotions and ambitions by analysing learning opportunities that facilitate my 'being' an academic. Drawing on theoretical frames from autoethnography, I engage in personal epistemological vigilance by directing my sociological gaze inwards. I retroactively and selectively draw on diary recordings of my own micro-ethnographies, and my teaching portfolio statement as the data sets. My entry into this slippery, treacherous space evokes feelings of vulnerability and hyper-visibility. It illuminates the struggle of being on the right-hand side of binaries such as disciplinary specialist/ interdisciplinary researcher, experienced/novice academic, and scholar/teacher. This work has implications for other academics who feel undervalued, over-extended and trapped in the labour of teaching.

Why and how I tell my story

In this narrative, I make a conscious effort to understand and make visible my professional experience including my suppressed feelings, emotions and ambitions as a woman academic. This exploration of my academic journey illuminates "educational challenges that have resonance beyond the self" (Pithouse, Mitchell and Webb, 2009, p.43) and creates an opportunity for crafting responses to these challenges. Delamont (2007, p.1) argues that "introspection is not an appropriate substitute for data collection" and cannot be used to drive our "disciplines forward". I contend that my account is not embedded in a solipsistic intention. Far from being an endeavour in self-obsession (Delamont, 2007), this sharing of my experiences is intended to have transferable implications for other academic identities. I look for cultural meanings of my lived experiences with others, and analyse these using supporting literature.

I engage in this autoethnographic account using a subjective lens to gain and share new understandings of the interaction of my academic self with the higher education professional culture. Spry (2001, p.711) describes the autoethnographic researcher as the “epistemological and ontological nexus” of the research process. Autoethnography connects the knower to what is known, and to what is knowable, and thereby links the “personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.739). Based on the ontological assumption that cultural realities are perceived differently by people who emerge from the same cultural setting, the autoethnographer seeks to offer “narrative truth as pragmatic truth” and strives for “verisimilitude and truthfulness” instead of precision and truth (Ashley and Peterson, 2015, pp.226–227).

Entering the world of academia

After teaching secondary school Biology for 22 years, I enthusiastically entered the world of higher education. My achievements as a teacher had included my qualification with a doctoral degree in education, my appointments to the positions of Head of Department in Science and Mathematics education, provincial examiner, senior marker, cluster co-ordinator for Biology, and examiner for the National Science Olympiads, among other things. I was well-known and well-liked by subject advisors and my peers, and felt confident to take the vertiginous leap into the world of academia.

I resigned from the position as a school teacher on a Friday, and on the subsequent Monday, I began my work as a teacher in an academic institution in the Department of Science Teacher Education. I felt that I was given a blank page on which I could make my mark in higher education. Little did I realise that the “invisible ink of expectation” (Hayler, 2011, p.3) was very real. There was no academic who was appointed to nurture me into the teaching practices at this level. A module file was handed to me and I was requested to teach. I was allocated several undergraduate classes with large numbers of students, and this resonates with experiences of early career academics in other settings (see Fitzmaurice, 2013; McAlpine, 2014). The mentor who was assigned to me conducted a lecture visit once during each of three semesters, and wrote a report; this was the limit of mentorship. This lack of “systemic socialization” was also experienced by early career academics in

Portnoi's study (2009, p.187). A small storage room which was located a distance away from offices occupied by staff was allocated to me. An old computer was given to me. I had neither a telephone nor access to a printer or photocopier. My 'office' was equipped with two large, old wooden tables and a small bookshelf. In a moment of intuitive perspicuity, I realised that I was literally and figuratively a 'peripheral professional'.

The teaching was exhausting. After the end of teaching, I remained on campus, adapted materials from the module files and generated new teaching materials. There was no joint enterprise in sight and no further sharing of skills and expertise. Three weeks after my appointment, I was called to a meeting and asked about my plans for research outputs. Having been overwhelmed by teaching responsibilities, I realised I had hardly given any thought to writing scientific papers. I was embarrassed and felt like an unworthy investment because I neglected to attend to that most critical part of being an academic, known as PUs (an unfortunate acronym!) or productivity units. Unlike early career academics in the study conducted by Fitzmaurice (2013), I was not acutely aware of the fiscal austerity which demanded performance in terms of research productivity units. The euphoria of being an academic rapidly atrophied as the reality that I was in an unfamiliar space, which was disordered, descended. This, however, represented a transcendental moment, a moment in which I resolved to create the opportunities to re-orientate in order to navigate the higher education terrain.

The first step was to make a conscious effort to understand my professional experience and to locate myself as the "epistemic subject" (Greene, 1971, p.3). By becoming fully attentive to my professional life, I would be enabled to perceive new things *en route* to what Phenix (cited in Greene, 1971, p.6), refers to as "self transcendence" which enables one to simultaneously be "agent and knower and at once to identify with what (one) comes to know". In order to chart the academic terrain, I needed to make landmarks visible which presented themselves as questions. How do I meet the requirements of the work of an academic, which included teaching, research and community engagement? What is the critical literature related to my scholarship of teaching? What informs my approaches to teaching and assessment? Which philosophies underpin my journey through the academic triad of the teaching, research and community engagement? Who are the philosophical giantesses and giants who influence my thinking? What is my research niche area? How does my academic work intersect with what Husu (2001, p.178) refers to as the "complexity of women's academic positions"? How can I become that

academic whose contribution is not trebly negligible because she is black, a woman and in the junior echelons of the higher education hierarchy?

In “stepping back” I examine my “situated self” which is contingent on the socio-political and historical milieu (Pithouse, Mitchell and Webb, 2009, p.44). This personal exploration of “scholarship in and through teaching” (Loughran, 2004, p.7) is underpinned by theoretical constructs from “postmodern, feminist and post-colonial paradigms” (LaBoskey, 2004b, p.818). Instead of perpetuating the *status quo*, my retrospective introspection aims to “provoke, challenge and illuminate” (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p.20). I position myself as, what LaBoskey (2004a) refers to, being both actor and spectator.

Why autoethnography?

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) contend that researching thoughts, actions and emotions which are rooted in personal experience, raises the consciousness of readers to identity politics. They add that autoethnography can also remove the shroud of silence around personal decisions related to meeting institutional requirements. Maistry (2015) ventures beyond this veil of silence at a South African higher education institution by offering a candid account of how academics are coerced to comply with officially sanctioned performance requirements. He refers to the “dense surveillance network” (Maistry, 2015, p.30) to which academics are constantly subjected, and he provides a personal account of his position within that network which he refers to as the “power machinery” (p.31). His commitment to the “understanding of truth telling, or parrhesia” (Maistry, 2015, p.25), elucidates an institutional structure which relentlessly unleashes its disciplinary power.

The value of autoethnography in understanding identity politics of contemporary academics is evident in the works of several researchers. According to Archer (2008, p.387), academic identity development involves non-linear, disrupted processes of “unbecoming” young academics when they cannot contribute to the corporate demands of the university within the fixed time frame. The constant stress and pressure and the real threat of being “rendered illegitimate” erodes at new academics’ sense of self (Archer, 2008, p.390). Archer’s study (2008) reveals how self-doubt about their competence paradoxically resulted in novice academics’ choice to engage in inauthentic,

contrived behaviours and language, in order to be perceived as authentic academics, and a legitimate investment. Dison (2004), who researched students who were enrolled in a research capacity development workshop, found that young academics experienced race and gender prejudices. Researchers who were black and female were engaged mainly as field workers, because they were perceived to be familiar with black peoples' culture and language. However, once the data had been generated, it was to be handed to researchers who were perceived to be more competent to interpret and write – these were white, 'authentic' researchers. The effects of racialised and gendered asymmetries of power on becoming (and possibly unbecoming) an academic persist in post-apartheid South Africa (Dison, 2004; Maritz and Prinsloo, 2015).

Autoethnography among teacher educators

Hayler (2011, p.13) underscores the need to hear voices of teacher educators through "self-narrative . . . lived experience with all its historical, social and cultural contexts . . . it follows that experiences of teacher educators offer insight and illumination in this key area of education". Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p.4) assert that a crucial quality of narrative inquiry in education by storying and restorying one's life is the possibility of generating "stories of empowerment". This can be enhanced by applying the characteristics of autoethnography, as elucidated by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010). These include the production of thick descriptions of experience, both with oneself and with others; the use of methodological tools for reflexive inquiry; writing about critical moments or epiphanies which result in a significant direction in the trajectory of one's career; the consideration of how other people may have experienced similar critical moments; the accommodation of emotionality and subjectivity in research, the troubling of canonical ideas which underpin conventional research; and the different assumptions which people possess of the world which are based on social markers of difference, such as age, race, social class, gender and level of educational achievement. These characteristics inform the telling and interpretation of my story.

My story

I play my hand and tell my story (Hayler, 2011), and in sharing this experience of making sense of my professional life, I hope to contribute to my and other academics' understanding of teacher education and teacher educators. I do not intend to negate the "poststructural, antifoundational arguments" (Denzin, 2006, p.421), which are becoming increasingly conspicuous in the social sciences research landscape. Therefore I will not embed my story in parochial philosophical paradigms. I am aware that "reductive analytic analysis and theorization" (Canagarajah, 2012, p.258) is considered by some researchers as being subaltern to the rich, descriptive stories which constitute evocative autoethnography. I cannot deny my emotional recall of forgotten motivations and suppressed feelings, experienced as a nascent academic. However, I weave the thread of professional identity as I story my interaction with different academic cultural communities. I am reminded that autoethnography as a methodology is simultaneously ethnographic, interpretive and autobiographical (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010). Therefore, I consciously engage both emotionally and cognitively in order to give an account which is faithful to my experience.

My initial professional identity in higher education was a teacher of undergraduate students in the school of science education. I aspired to become more than this. One critical moment which fueled this aspiration came at the end of 2008, after my first eight months in academia. It involved a chance meeting with a senior management member. He was walking hurriedly up a staircase which I was descending. He offered a courteous greeting and while stepping, he said that he wanted to meet me and talk about publications. I said that I had published one article. He stopped climbing. He turned to face me. He enquired about the name of the journal. My reply pleased him because it was an accredited journal. A smile of satisfaction spread across his face and he said how pleased he was, and praised me generously. I was delighted! Until this incident, I had little idea about how deeply academic publications (and the authors thereof) were valued. This was a crucial moment and it motivated me to become an academic who taught meaningfully in undergraduate and postgraduate modules, who was a research supervisor, a published author, a principal investigator and participant in research projects.

Transforming teaching

I begin this reflection on my pedagogy by looking back to my diary entry as a novice academic, sharing thoughts which arose on interrogating my teaching in the interregnum, and micro-movements which signaled changes in the trajectory of my practice.

My diary reflection in my first year as an academic provides telling clues to my identity as a novice academic.

29 April 2008

Taught nutrition. Showed clear, excellent quality pics of people suffering from kwashiorkor, anaemia, rickets and scurvy. Students felt revulsion at the scurvy one – bleeding gums! They paid attention. Someone asked about different kinds of anaemia- nice to know that they knew there was more than one kind. Am happy with notes – cover everything needed.

Looking inward, I realised I had become a traditional teacher and was promoting what Freire referred to as “banking education”. I was making “deposits” by giving students copious bodies of notes and powerpoint slides, which they were expected to “patiently receive, memorise and repeat” (Freire, 1970, p.58). When I stated that the notes ‘cover everything needed’, I meant that the Incidence, Symptoms and Signs, Causes and Treatment/Management, and Prevention of each disease were included. And that was it. The end! My discourse was biomedical, based on centuries of Eurocentric science and scientists such as James Lind (scurvy), Daniel Whistler and Francis Glisson (rickets), and Cicely Williams (kwashiorkor). I was enacting this pedagogy within a socio-politically transforming South African context. This fledgling democracy enshrined grand aims and principles in its policies, such as the National Curriculum Statement for Life Sciences (Department of Education, 2011, pp.4–5), to guide teachers, and these included:

- Equipping learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfillment and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country

- Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed
- Encouraging an active and critical approach to learning rather than rote and uncritical learning of truths
- Infusing the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa . . . sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language. . .
- Valuing of indigenous knowledge systems

On reflection, I realised that my pedagogy was discordant with my deeply held beliefs and values about science education and its purpose, which resonated with the preceding aims and principles. My approach was flawed. Drawing from Fitzmaurice (2013) I see this critical moment as being underpinned by my obligation to students to teach for meaningful change. I realised I was not preparing science teachers to teach for ‘social transformation’, ‘meaningful participation in society’ and being ‘sensitive to . . . poverty, inequality. . .’ as outlined in the policy. As a teacher educator in science, I needed to look outward towards ways which would heighten the awareness of pre-service science teachers, who were my students, about how they could transform their teaching and thereby transform their communities.

This change in my stance was not informed solely by education policy imperatives. I also aimed to craft a career which was moulded, in part, by the vision and mission of the tertiary institution which I served. I did so not simply to be compliant, but because these were underpinned by a liberatory ideology, which resonated with my personal views about the purpose of education. I sought to create spaces for my students and I to engage in critical forms of inquiry, to cultivate a spirit of social responsibility, and to promote self-sufficiency and empowerment in the wider society.

A focus on socially relevant science education by exploring socio-scientific issues became central to my pedagogy. I sought to model the role of a science teacher through my own teaching. I wanted to deviate from the scientist-centred approach to create a student-centred point of view, which focused on citizens as beneficiaries of science education. My goal was to motivate students to learn and teach science for “social responsibility” (Hayler, 2011,

p.362). Later, through reading, it dawned on me that I had unwittingly adopted a humanistic perspective to science education (or perhaps the humanistic perspective had adopted me), which was somewhat subversive to traditional school science. Instead of values of submission and maintenance of the *status quo*, I decided to focus on values of transformation and emancipation, and to educate for critical consciousness. I wanted to navigate away from traditional science education with its ‘top-down’ approach, towards a liberating education, not merely *for* my students but *with* my students. According to Dos Santos (2009), a humanistic perspective to science education is underpinned by theoretical constructs from critical pedagogy and aims to transform oppressive contexts. Drawing on my experience as a school teacher, I was acutely mindful of the social chasm between working class and middle class learners (at schools) and students (at tertiary institutions). I wanted to raise my students’ consciousness about how they could produce knowledge through human practices in order to address community challenges.

Borrowing from Freire (1976), the following guidelines for a transformative education applied to my practice:

1. *Exploring students’ socio-cultural contexts* and concerns which could be applied to science education. I created the opportunity for dialogue and debate during the lecture periods, and students articulated many social challenges in their communities, including malnutrition and disease, poverty and environmental degradation. Based on students’ views, instead of teaching about nutrition in the ‘traditional’ way as I had done previously, I developed a major project titled: Nutrition and health through food gardening. Students were required to work collaboratively with one another and other knowledge holders and develop strategies to promote self-sufficiency and resilience in their communities, by creating gardens for nutrition and alleviating health problems. Borrowing from Ferreira and Ebersohn (2012, p.32), I positioned the nutritional challenge as a “risk factor” and the student as the “protective resource”. Instead of focusing on canonical science content embedded in the traditional scientific approach, my students engaged in a science which had practical utility and focused on social issues.

2. *Sharing the world with others.* Students were required to work with community members, such as health care providers and teachers, to determine the prevalence and management of disease in the community.
3. *Constructing and reconstructing the world.* I engaged the services of a permaculturalist who taught students how to plant crops in a workshop activity (Figure 1). I also worked with an indigenous knowledge holder who taught students the value of African indigenous medicinal plants (Figure 2). I wanted to trouble the notion that “knowledge systems not rooted in the western mode of thinking are ‘naturally’ subaltern” (Mudaly and Ismail, 2013, p.173). Through this project I sought to create a space for valuing and learning indigenous practices. In order to disrupt the idea that academics who were schooled in the western traditions of science, were the only source of legitimate knowledge, I engaged the services of custodians of indigenous knowledge and non-academic experts in permaculture. The world of teaching and learning science within the teacher education milieu was reconstructed in these ways.



Figure 1: Permaculturalist as a teacher in higher education



Figure 2: Traditional healer as a teacher in higher education

Students engaged in the transformation of the situation in their communities by developing food gardens on the university grounds and in selected schools. For me, multiple personal and professional goals, which were blurred because they overlapped, were met in and through this work. First, students learned how to cultivate gardens using permaculture methods and African indigenous methods, with a view to applying this knowledge when they became practicing teachers to address similar challenges in their school communities. Second, indigenous knowledge systems which had been marginalised for centuries were being restored and revalued in contemporary society. Third, the perpetuation of superordinate relations of power and knowledge, rooted in epistemic understandings of Euro-western education, was being disrupted. Fourth, students were being trained for community engagement using the vehicle of science education. Here, science education included sciences from different knowledge systems, which was taught by diverse knowledge holders. Finally, the traditional ways of learning to teach science were being disturbed through the pursuit of difference, which was navigated by collapsing disciplinary boundaries. Through this activity, students were enabled to “develop a critical comprehension of their social reality and transform it” (Dos Santos, 2009, p.374).

The following excerpt from my teaching portfolio, developed in my sixth year of service, which expresses the rationale for my teaching approach, resonates with the pedagogy that I have described:

31 January 2014

I create a form of science education which encourages and enables students to reflect on their civic responsibility within the context of contemporary South African society. Educating students for critical consciousness by designing teaching and supervision in a way that words, pictures and actions generate a transformable praxis, influence my thinking. My teaching approach resonates with that of Paulo Freire (1994, p.78), who wrote in his book, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*:

. . . let it not be said that, if I am a biology teacher, I must not go off into other considerations: – that I must only teach biology, as if the phenomenon of life could be understood apart from its historical-social, cultural and political framework. As if life, just life, could be lived in the same way . . . in a favela (slum) . . . as in the prosperous area of Sao Paulo's Gardens! If I am a biology teacher, obviously I must teach biology. But in doing so, I must not cut off from the framework of the whole.

By inserting science education into human reality, I teach more than physiology and anatomy in biology and science education; I transcend disciplinary boundaries by revealing how teachers can work with learners to co-construct knowledge and create spaces for a transformation of their identities.

This re-thinking of my practice occurred because I valued student-centred science education which ordinary people could apply in their daily lives. The following excerpt from my teaching portfolio sums up the theoretical considerations which underpinned the transformation of my practice as a higher education teacher:

15 February 2015

Drawing on theoretical insights from Aikenhead, Ogunniyi, Onwu, Kyle, Weiler, Giroux and Moletsane I show how teachers and learners can become agents of cultural production and not be passively locked in a process of cultural reproduction.

On becoming a researcher

Three years after I had joined the university, I was invited to apply for a competitive grant for teaching and learning by a senior colleague who was familiar with my work in the science education department. It is possible that my identity as a higher education teacher in the undergraduate teaching modules, who used unconventional sources and methods, was what motivated my colleague to encourage me to design a research proposal, titled “Exploring learning and teaching methodologies in ethno-botany and integrating these in Life Sciences and Natural Sciences education Higher Education curricula”. I was awarded the grant and served as the Principal Investigator, and worked in collaboration with two senior peers from the science education department. This signaled my move away from the periphery because for the first time, I felt that I belonged to a community characterised by “mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire” (Wenger, 1998, p.73). I had entered the community of practice for research. This was preceded by a change in spatial arrangements. Although I still occupied the post as a lecturer, I was moved into a large office, which was designed for use by a professor in terms of its furniture, equipment and lighting. I was thrilled and felt that this environment was conducive to my professional development.

Entering and navigating the postgraduate teaching terrain

I continued to feel excluded from postgraduate teaching in the science education department. Postgraduate modules were taught by senior academics in the Science Education Department and there was no space for me in that place. Borrowing from Walker (1998), I remained an outsider in that sacred postgraduate space for years. I felt that I was deemed as too inexperienced to traverse the postgraduate terrain. I was reminded of Chrisler’s (1998) studies of higher education institutions which revealed men’s roles as those of scholars, while women’s roles were limited to teaching. The subtle barriers to women’s advancement as scholars in higher education has been well-documented (Mama, 2006; Tsikata, 2007; Walker, 1998). Novice academics in Dison’s study (2004) also experienced marginalisation from scholarly work which was the domain of ‘authentic’, experienced, white researchers. It is possible that race, gender and experience, as “technologies of power” (Maritz and Prinsloo, 2015, p.696), were intersecting forces which made me believe

that becoming an authentic female academic was impossible. I yearned to be more than a teacher; I aspired to become a scholar in science education. My view was that teaching postgraduate modules would give me the critical edge which would enable me to become a published author of academic work. In order to transcend this barrier, I realised that I had to engage in activities which required “sustained engagement and readjustment” (Wenger, 1998, p.53) to participate in the postgraduate sector. I requested a formal meeting with the Dean of Research in the Faculty of Education where I indicated the areas of my research interests, and my motivation to work in the postgraduate sector. Subsequently, I was invited to serve on committees to examine research proposals which were presented by Masters and PhD students. There was neither formal training for this work nor any remuneration in the form of workload hours or financial benefit. I read research proposals, and researched theoretical and analytic frameworks, to prepare to participate and “contribute to the negotiation of meaning by being a member of a community” (Wenger, 1998, p.55). The following diary entry in the second year of my work as an academic takes me backwards to that experience:

20 October 2009

I reviewed the PhD proposal about pregnancy among school going learners. I told the student that he was demonizing pregnant school girls. Was that (demonising) a harsh word? Maybe I should have said that he was victimizing the girls by positioning them as being ‘bad’.

I feel I had used ‘strong language’ in order to impress the panel. That was not who I was, and I felt like a fraud for having used what I perceived to have been ‘harsh language’. This inauthentic behaviour (Lechuga, 2012) on my part evoked feelings of guilt and remorse. In retrospect, it now becomes clear to me that I had been a novice academic and was doing all that I could to belong, and was desperately attempting to prove my epistemic credibility. It is possible that I did impress, because subsequently, I was invited to numerous proposal presentations. I was more careful about my choice of words and quickly learned the value of constructive critique. I tried to establish a ‘safe space’ in which students and supervisors could respond without feeling intimidated or humiliated, and I felt a greater sense of peace after such engagement. This deliberate choice to change my approach towards proposal defences emerged after personal reflection, and could signal an example of “emotional work” (Lechuga, 2012, p.88) in my academic development.

Participation in examination panels marked my entry into the postgraduate community of practice, although this was not located within the science education discipline. I had achieved this by volunteering my time and effort to support students in their preparation for research, by serving as a member of research proposal examination panels. I was involved in “doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging” (Wenger, 1998, p.56), and in the fifth year of my work, I was requested to serve as chairperson of the panel. The following excerpt from my diary illuminates that experience:

5 March 2013

I chaired the proposal panel today. There was little time to prepare- (the administrator) gave me a checklist of things to do. I started by welcoming members of the panel and the student. I told the student that he should not perceive this as a ‘defence’ but that it was a discussion to enable us to see that he had a realistic plan to conduct the research. I said that he needed to assure us that he was capable of doing research and that the panel intended to be supportive of his work. After the student and supervisor left the room, Dr S (a fellow panel member) remarked that this was the first time she had attended a proposal which was framed as a discussion, and where the student and supervisor were not made to feel as though they were on trial.

I became increasingly conscious that I could maintain the professional standards of the postgraduate community of practice without creating a cold, severely harsh and critical environment. My continued engagement in this community of practice reveals the “transformative potential” (Wenger, 1998, p.56) of participation. This participation was not limited to my “engagement in practice” (Wenger, 1998, p.57) but has contributed to part of who I have become. On 18 March 2014, based on the recommendation of a senior management member, I was appointed to serve on the College Research Committee. What began as voluntary participation in postgraduate panels in the School of Education evolved into a trajectory which “spanned boundaries” and linked communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p.154). My participation spanned both the School and College communities.

My aspiration to teach on postgraduate modules persisted. Although I was a member of the community of practice of science teacher education, my participation remained peripheral because I was not involved in postgraduate teaching. The priority to graduate more Masters and Doctoral students became more urgent with each passing year to meet financial demands of the higher

education institution. It is crucial for academics to lecture in postgraduate programmes in order to remain relevant and meet the needs which emerge from the “business-like management of higher education institutions” (Van Laren and Mudaly, 2012, p.1081).

After one proposal panel discussion, in my third year of higher education teaching, I was invited by a professor to teach on a generic module in the Masters programme, which was not located in the science discipline. As an undergraduate science teacher educator, I had built my identity on an interdisciplinary base, where I had merged disciplinary knowledge and knowledge from alternative systems. The generic Masters module had little in common with my work with undergraduate students, and I required professional support in order to develop as a postgraduate lecturer. I had to become what LaBoskey (2004a) refers to as both actor and spectator, and chose to engage with a “boundary trajectory identity” (Jawitz, 2009, p.248) in order to sustain my identity across the undergraduate and postgraduate communities of practice. As a novice academic in the postgraduate terrain, I had to gain access to this postgraduate teaching community and to contribute to it in a way that would make it part of my identity.

Teaching on post-graduate modules is valued because it plays a role in generating income through postgraduate output. I worked collaboratively with three senior academics to teach Masters students about designing research proposals. We were a diverse group of professionals from different disciplinary backgrounds. However, we “shared a passion for development of professional and social leadership” (Van Laren and Mudaly, 2012, p.1085) and this created the opportunity for mutual engagement, which connected us as academics. The following diary excerpt illuminates an experience of teaching on this module:

13 March 2010

I am exhausted. I have been ill and had a large number of scripts for MEd Assessment 3 to mark. Students’ results seemed to have improved in the data collection plan assignment compared to literature review assignment. There was one piece which was a theoretical study and, on reading it, quite difficult to interpret. I asked (my colleague) to assess it for me. The student obtained 50% and was upset and left the lecture at tea time, and did not return for the rest of the day. The lecturer who helped me mark the script appeared concerned. I felt disappointed about the student not being able to cope with criticism and to learn from it.

I was exhausted because the preparation to teach and assess students' work was intensive. I had to read and perform desktop studies in order to familiarise myself with the diverse research areas in which students were engaged. However, working with a team of academics in this postgraduate teaching community enabled me to feel that I was in a safe space to request assistance from my more experienced colleague whose areas of specialisation were conceptual and theoretical frameworks. My venturing into this unfamiliar territory was shaped by my own efforts and the efforts of my colleagues. Throughout our practice, we maintained a collegial arrangement which was enriched by "reciprocal peer learning" (Mudaly, 2012, p.47). The informal commitment of senior, more experienced academics to my professional development through the celebration of my small successes enabled me to reimagine my academic identity as a confident teacher in the postgraduate landscape. I learned that postgraduate students were diverse in terms of age, experience, language and writing proficiency, and personal life responsibilities and challenges, as compared to undergraduate students. I paid increasing attention to Hyatt's (2005) assertions about the deleterious effects of ill-conceived remarks made by academics, and I attempted to be more cautious and sensitive when I interacted with postgraduate students.

From teacher to scholar

My experience of teaching on the Masters module was invaluable. It paved the way for me to be entrusted with supervising research projects of postgraduate students within the science discipline. My postgraduate supervisory experiences were characterised by what Hugo (2009) describes as "complex and negotiated dialogical space between the supervisor and student". My identity as well as the identities of my students were moulded on socio-cultural histories, and involved creating spaces for networking with broader intellectual communities. My attachment to the emancipatory goals of education influenced the supervisory process. I underscored the importance of breathing life into abstract philosophical knowledge, by interweaving these with people's lived experiences, and developing feeling for people who live and are educated within a particular socio-historical context, with a view to using education as a vehicle for redressing power inequalities. During the last three years of my work, I graduated at least one postgraduate student per year. In 2014, one of my students was awarded her Masters degree *summa cum laude*.

Conclusion

The features which characterise autoethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010) permeate this reconstruction of my academic self. I have offered detailed, evocative descriptions of interpersonal and personal experiences which shaped my professional identity during my academic journey. My methodological tools for reflexive inquiry enabled me to see and interpret the meaning of critical moments. In giving voice to my personal and cultural story, I disrupted the researcher/researched hierarchy by iteratively moving between and within both positions. Through this personal narrative, I “invite readers to enter the author’s world and use what they learn there to reflect on, understand and cope with their own lives” (Ellis, 2004, p.46).

Interrogation of my micro-movements has illuminated spaces for self-improvement. This occurred through a process of give and take, advocated by Wenger (1998), which involved my volunteering to serve the school in advancing its goals for postgraduate throughput. Through these activities, I became more visible and opportunities for interaction with other academics increased.

In this personal autobiographic account, I have consciously positioned myself as actor/practitioner and spectator/researcher and located my academic story as a subject of critical inquiry. I have provided insight into my multimembership which spanned several communities of practice, including communities of undergraduate teaching, postgraduate teaching, postgraduate supervision and collaborative discipline-specific research with peers. Using what Wenger refers to as “brokering”, I selectively transferred elements from one practice to another (Wenger, 1998, p.109). In this “nexus of multimembership” (Wenger, 1998, p.159), the trajectories of my academic identities became part of one another. My academic identity shifted continuously, and transcended spatio-temporal boundaries, which embodied the past, present and future in “interlocked trajectories” (Wenger, 1998, p.158).

This work has implications for other academics, who feel that they are the over-worked servants of the knowledge class and trapped in the labour of teaching. It provides insights into transcending barriers associated with being perceived as an interdisciplinary researcher instead of a disciplinary expert, and discrimination which novice academics experience. This work illuminates

ways in which fragmentation in academic life may be overcome. Ideas of brokering, joint enterprise, sharing of different skills and expertise through multimembership, can mobilise academics from the periphery towards the inside of the academic community, and fuel professional and personal inquiry, as well as transformation and renewal.

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Naked teaching: uncovering selves in the reflexive classroom

Keith Berry and Nathan Hodges

Abstract

This autoethnography explores our experiences teaching an undergraduate autoethnography course entitled, 'Writing Lives'. We, Keith and Nathan, Professor and Doctoral candidate, convey narrative scenes and reflections of sharing and analysing our published stories with students, working with students through the process of writing their personal stories, and transformative moments during the course. We emphasise a vulnerable, reflexive, and empathetic approach to teaching and learning that allows students and teachers to uncover aspects of who they are and hope to be in the classroom. This work advocates a number of unique benefits to autoethnographic practices that foster open and intimate bonds.

We open our end-of-semester course evaluations and read students' comments¹

This course was difficult, in a fulfilling way. It challenged me to create order out of chaos in my writing and face sensitive emotional experiences head on. Most importantly, the course gave me a safe place to practice reflective writing, which I have never done.

You provided a nurturing and loving environment that allows for students to feel comfortable to tackle vulnerable topics. How you got a class of people who were different ages, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and belief systems to open up and share their vulnerabilities and insecurities is beyond me.

'Nurturing', 'sensitive emotional experiences', 'vulnerable' – these aren't words typically used to describe college classes. Our students often describe their other classes as sterile, and their relationship with professors and

¹

The stories we convey stem from the teaching of two different 'Writing Lives' classes, which we taught separately during the fall 2014 semester. We bring them together here to show a shared orientation to the benefits and challenges inherent to our teaching.

students as distanced and impersonal. Some students prefer these types of classes, but what happens when professors put their personal guards down and open up about intimate aspects of their lives? Who are we and who do we become as teachers and learners?

This autoethnography explores issues of vulnerability, reflexivity, and empathy among teachers and students. We, Keith and Nathan, Professor and Doctoral candidate, focus on how these issues are lived within 'Writing Lives', a popular undergraduate autoethnography course at our university. First, we provide overviews of autoethnography, relational perspective, and identity negotiation, approaches informing our courses and this article. Next, we include narrative scenes of sharing our stories with students, mentoring students in sharing their stories, and transformational moments. Lastly, we discuss benefits and risks of vulnerability for teachers and students, including how vulnerable teaching allows for a dynamic uncovering of selves. This article advocates teaching as a site for inquiry and joins ongoing discussions about power and identity in teaching relationships (Berry, in press, 2012; Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Fassett and Warren, 2007; Pelias, 2000; Warren, 2011).

Writing lives

"You're all here for advanced statistics, right?" I say. Students look back puzzled and shake their heads. "No? Okay, well welcome to Writing Lives. I'm Nathan Hodges and I'm your instructor this semester. You can call me Nathan, Nate, Instructor, or whatever you want as long as it doesn't offend others." Several students laugh. I watch one student scan me from my Chuck Taylor high top shoes to my fedora. I sense his surprise at my casual dress and youth. I look around at the circle of students cramped together in our small classroom. We were originally assigned to a stadium-style seating room, but vulnerable discussion can be difficult when you're looking at the back of someone's head.

"It's important in a class like this that we build an intimate community, so let's get to know each other." We spend the next twenty minutes doing icebreaker activities. Students introduce themselves by saying their name backwards, discussing their writing experience, sharing a 6-word story about

their lives, and singing a lyric from their favorite song. I participate in the introductions, too.

“Now that you’ve had a chance to skim each other’s surfaces, I think it’s important for me to share some history about my life. Each of you this semester will be writing about challenging, personal life experiences and I want you to feel comfortable sharing your personal stories. I’m a third year Ph.D candidate in the Department of Communication and this is my second time teaching Writing Lives. I’m the first person in my immediate family to go to college. My dad is an assembly line worker and my mom is a supervisor in a warehouse, but she spent most of my childhood waitressing. My experiences growing up in a working-class family form the foundation for my graduate studies, and also influence how I approach teaching and writing. I consider myself to be a blue-collar scholar, both working-class and academic. I’ve made a choice to go to college but I don’t in any way see this as a *better* choice than the choices my family made. You’ll get to know more about my history and views on social class throughout the semester, and we will read one of my stories about working in a factory. For now let’s go through the syllabus.”

Students pull out paper copies of their syllabus. “I’d like you to read through the opening narrative and let me know if you have questions.”

I glance down at my copy.

This semester you will write evocative stories about your lives as a way to understand, cope with, and communicate social experiences. Through personal, reflective writing, we learn about ourselves and society, connect to others, come to terms with and reframe experiences, and create new ways of thinking and living. Writing is hard work. To be a better writer you have to write and read a lot. There will be no shortcuts in this class. I believe most deep, meaningful learning is wrought with confusion, doubt, and failure. Trust the process. Jump off the cliff and expect that you’ll figure out how to land without turning into soup. When you finally reach ground, you might have a few scrapes and bruises, but you’ll have the wisdom and resilience that comes from confronting your vulnerabilities on the page.

A few students get out their cellphone after reading, seemingly uncomfortable. I wave at them to put their phones away.

“Any questions?” Most students around the room are smiling. A few look scared. “Your major project will be a 15–20 page autoethnography, which will go through several rounds of feedback and revision. What is this long, clunky word, “autoethnography”? Think of autoethnography as personal narrative, reflection, and analysis that weaves in other voices, often from academic literature (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013). You will use literary methods – scenes with characters, dialogue, descriptions – to help readers experience an experience, trying to help them see what you saw, feel what you felt, think what you thought, and struggle with the ambiguities and emotional dilemmas you faced. You will also reflect upon and analyse your experience, connecting your personal experience to wider cultural, political, and social experiences. I’ve created an autoethnography handout for you to use as a reference this semester.” I hand twenty-two copies to a student in the front row and ask her to circulate them.

Autoethnography . . .

- ❖ is evocative, vulnerable, and reflexive (Ellis, 2004; Berry and Clair, 2011).
- ❖ aspires to truth, but not certainty. Welcome uncertainty and question yourself throughout the research process. Autoethnographers realise “truth is contested, partial, incomplete, and always in motion” (Tullis, Jillian, McRae, Adams and Vitale, 2009, p.185). We’re interested in the potential of narrative truth (Bochner, 2014), what experiences mean and their utility.
- ❖ is relational. Autoethnography “is an empathic adventure, a quest to try to see into the lives of others. . .even if such a ‘seeing into’ is by nature partial, an interpretive fiction” (Doty, 2005, p.161). Autoethnography is also applied communication research (Berry and Patti, 2015) that benefits researchers and others (e.g., readers, audience members).
- ❖ is critical, allowing us to negotiate socially stigmatized identities and complicate taken-for-granted assumptions, and to imagine more just, inclusive worlds (Boylorn and Orbe, 2013).
- ❖ is a process of inquiry. We learn about ourselves and others through the process of writing and revising (Richardson, 1994).
- ❖ can be transformational (Berry, 2013, Ellis, 2009) as we make sense of ourselves and our experiences through writing. One important therapeutic tool of autoethnography is narrative reframing (Kiesinger, 2002), in which we “actively reinvent our accounts. . .in ways that empower rather than victimize us” (p. 107).

“Don’t worry, we’ll discuss these ideas more throughout the semester. Now I want to discuss three words I’ll be emphasizing again and again throughout the semester, ideas that are at the heart of the kind of writing and learning community we’re working to create this semester.” I pull the cap off my dry-erase marker and write on the white board:

Vulnerability

Reflexivity

Empathy

“As teachers, students, and autoethnographers, I want us striving to be vulnerable, reflexive, and empathetic.” I point toward the board. “What’s vulnerability?”

“It’s opening yourself up,” says a male student with long, flowing hair and a soft voice.

“Yes, being vulnerable is like revealing your personal browsing history. A willingness to open up, to stand naked, to reveal doubts, insecurities, and ambivalences, those thoughts and feelings most of us have, but rarely reveal for fear of being stigmatised and rejected.”

“And what’s reflexivity?” I wait out silence, though a bit longer this time.

“Is it like reflection?”

“Yeah, but a bit deeper. There are different ways of defining and using reflexivity (Berry and Clair, 2011). We each understand the world through the unique vantage point of our lived experience. When you’re being reflexive, you’re questioning why you think what you think and do what you do, in order to learn from your experiences. You’re thinking more carefully about your actions, feelings, and thoughts and how you came to make the decisions you did, including how your experiences are shaped by social, cultural, and political traditions. As autoethnographers we’ll practice reflexivity, showing our consciousness on the page,² questioning and arguing with ourselves.”

“And what about empathy?”

“Trying to understand another person’s perspective.”

2

Thanks to Arthur Bochner for this phrase.

“Yes, empathy involves trying to feel with a person, without judgment, to understand how someone made the choices they did considering the circumstances in which they lived. Good stories involve complex, multifaceted characters. When we set out to blame and vilify, our writing quickly turns into self-righteous narcissism. Without empathy, I see no point in writing.”

Uncovering Identity

“Today we focus on one specific question: “Who am I?” I am leading the students through an introduction to some of the ways in which identity relates to autoethnography.

“As I shared with you during our first class meeting, I use cultural approaches to study relational communication and identity in my research. I am particularly interested in how the societal problem of bullying occurs and impacts youth’s lives (see Berry, in press). A ‘relational’ perspective focuses on the meaning jointly constituted and used between relational partners (Gergen, 2009). Our worlds come alive together. We create and use communication and relationships together.”

Students feverishly write down notes, and upon request, I gladly repeat important points.

“Identity, at the very least, refers to who we understand ourselves and others to be. Who am I? I am a relational communication researcher, a student of bullying and identity, an autoethnographer and ethnographer, a gay man, a son and brother, a lover of good dance music, a student of mindfulness, and a best friend.”

“What about you . . . who are you?”

After a brief pause, several students raise their hands and announce identities: ‘college student’, ‘poor’, ‘Christian’, boyfriend’, ‘girlfriend’, ‘manager at work’, and ‘activist’.

“Excellent list, and because people embody multiple social locations, I suspect this is only a start to the many identities any one person in here could name about ourselves.”

“Identity is ‘social,’ meaning we come to understand who we are and aren’t within our relational communication. Can you think of interactions where this occurs?”

The students name several contexts wherein their identities have been formed, including their families, friendships, romantic partnerships, spiritual groups, and sports teams.

“Yes, good, we form our identities by relating across a diverse range of communication contexts, including this classroom . . .”

Students smile noting the link between the concept and our class.

“Also, those identities we have named are only the ones we feel comfortable naming right,” Rose says.³ “What about the ones we didn’t tell? After all, I don’t know anyone in here.”

“Beautiful point. You’re talking about the identities we hide, or try to keep from others, an understandable part of our lives. It’s often hard for some people to be themselves.”

A student in the front row, Justin, whom I have taught in a previous course, and who rarely talks in class, nods his head to affirm my point.

“I want you to begin thinking about how identities are not only formed within interaction and relationships, but are *negotiated* in those spaces. By emphasising identity as something people negotiate, as a ‘give and take’ of selves, we study how social constraints inform and sometimes govern who we are, and the challenges and delights that persist in being ourselves (see Berry, in press Yoshino, 2006).”

I notice some students smiling, suggesting they have personal relevance to the concept.

3

All names are pseudonyms except for the authors’.

“We will explore identity throughout the semester, so do not worry if these ideas are new to you. For now, know this: This course, autoethnography, and personal narrative, are informed by the idea that we negotiate stories and identities together.”

“Okay, for the rest of the class, let’s work on applying these concepts to our everyday lives. In your notes, please answer these fill-in-the-blank prompts with one or two words:

I am _____.

If you really knew me, you would know that I am _____.

The person in my life who has most significantly made me who I am today is _____.

“Once you’ve answered, find a partner, and share your responses with her/him. You should only write what you’re comfortable sharing. Yet, remember we’re working to build a space of dialogue in this class, so I hope you’ll be as open and honest as you can.”

Intimate exposure

“Good afternoon! Let us begin today’s class by discussing my bathhouse piece, *Embracing the Catastrophe: Gay Body Seeks Acceptance* (Berry, 2007).

In this piece I use personal narrative to examine issues concerning idealised body types among gay men. I draw on moments from my lived experience in a gay bathhouse, a cultural site for sexual activity and socialising. I focus primarily on standards used by many men in their interactive process of naming certain bodies attractive and acceptable. The essay is an example of autoethnography and personal narrative, one of many different models you may consider for your project.”

Many students nod their heads. Others’ eyes are now wide open, perhaps because I’ve mentioned gay sex.

“I wrote this piece because I believe people negotiate identities within diverse contexts, and the bathhouse site has often been overlooked by ‘traditional’ research. Writing this essay exposes the context, and in doing so, I expose myself to readers.”

“Funny,” Morgan says smiling. Several students chuckle, some grimace, letting me know they recognise my double entendre.

“My word choice is meant to be both humorous and meaningful. By publishing this piece and making it assigned reading, I am making myself vulnerable. I am taking risks in terms of how readers will understand and react to me. How will readers evaluate this work? Will they accept the ‘me’ I locate on the page? Might they reject my ideas, thereby rejecting me?”

“This type of writing is *personal on purpose*,” Morgan adds.

“Yes, and I am your professor, a role that makes this personal work more vulnerable. How many of your professors open themselves up in this way? It is fine if they do not, and sometimes it is not appropriate given their subject matter. It is not uncommon in my experience to hear people suggest that teachers and students can be close, but not *too close*. Exposing myself in these ways troubles common assumptions about boundaries.”

Some students nod their heads and write in their notebooks. Many have the glazed look on their faces that comes from too much abstract thinking. Time to move on to the story.

“What did you think of my essay?”

Justin breaks the silence, “I don't know if I can expose myself like this. I think it is brave to share stories like yours. I mean, I do not have anything to hide, but don't think I can be so vulnerable.”

A few students nod their heads.

“Your concern is perfectly understandable. This process involves putting ourselves on the line and the outcome is rarely known in advance. It can be scary. In this course you only write about experiences, thoughts, and feelings which you feel comfortable sharing.”

“I think this story is amazing and I learned a lot from it,” Rose adds.

“Thank you. What specifically was helpful?”

“For me it is the way you use vivid details about the bathhouse and being there, somewhere I have never been, and how isolated and on display this place makes you feel. There is one moment in the piece . . . well, let me read it out loud.” She flips through the article:

I recheck my towel, tighten its grip, and continue roaming through the various corridors on this floor. I walk passed the private rooms, peer inside, and typically see one man in each . . . Standing in front of these doors, which remain open as instances of overt sexual advertisement, I extend up and down glances of my own, often provide a smile, raise one of my eyebrows, grab and rub myself in the crotch, and work to make some form of connection. (Berry, 2007, p.272)

I smile hearing her read my words. Many students have marked this passage as being significant to them when I used the essay in past classes. I also smile because this is the passage about which I feel the most vulnerable. I, their professor, am openly sharing details about fondling myself in front of strangers. Thus, I smile in part from the awkwardness of this moment – awkward not because I feel the moment is ‘wrong’, but because this exposure makes me so vulnerable.

She continues reading:

[My] connection attempts can be futile and deceiving; so many of these men want to be penetrated, and perceived health risk keeps me from delivering . . . I am more often greeted with an uncompromising “no” gesture with the head, perhaps a swift hand and arm gesture telling me to move on, or worse yet, the other – from his bed – kicks the door shut . . . Coldness can become frequent in the baths (Berry, pp.272-273).

“Thank you for performing my words so beautifully,” I say joining students in applause.

Her performance enlivens many students. Some sit forward in their seats and appear to be looking for other passages to discuss. Yet others look disengaged, fidgeting with their cell phones and doodling in their notebooks. It is difficult to ignore the disengaged. Did they not read? Are they silent because they disapprove of bathhouses? Of someone being gay? I work to let go of needing to know, but their silences stay with me.

“So why does this passage stay with you?” I ask.

“Honestly, the story makes me think differently about you. I think so many of us are not used to knowing this much about our teachers. Our teachers care and are involved in our learning, but we don’t really *know* them. We don’t read about them being rejected by having a door slammed in their faces. We’re *really* getting to know you.”

“I love that you see it in that way,” I say.

“It’s not wrong, just different. But I still don’t feel as though I can be so vulnerable,” Justin says.

“That’s fine. Although I will be asking you to learn in ways that will probably challenge your comfort zones, you should be yourselves however it is you bring your story to life. Also, just because my experience writing like this has allowed me to be more comfortable with, and even excited by, vulnerability, that doesn’t mean I don’t still get nervous. Think about it – I’m standing in front of twenty five students who read about me in a bathhouse. I was a little nervous coming in today.”

“The nerves don’t go away?”

“The process often gets better over time and with practice. Yet, I think some nervousness is healthy. Maybe we’re nervous because the things we’re talking about matter so much to us, and we’re unsure how others will respond. I’ve learned to become more at peace with the nerves.”

* * * * *

“Before we begin our discussion, please get out your copy of the article and your body part story.” Students get out their paper copies of my article, *The American Dental Dream* (Hodges, 2015), and their writing assignment – a personal story about a body part. I scan my first page while waiting:

The cultural desire for straight, white teeth – is difficult, if not impossible, for poor and working-class people to achieve. In this autoethnography, I brush away the taken-for-granted assumptions about teeth, exploring the personal, relational, and structural consequences of this cultural desire, and showing how social class writes itself on our bodies. I write these teeth tales to show how one might cope with their teeth (Hodges, p.943).

“I share my autoethnography with you, not only as a model for your own paper, but to show you I am also a human being with personal struggles and insecurities. I’d be interested in hearing your connections, stories, questions, criticisms, grade-boosting praise.” Several students laugh. “What’d you all think?”

“I really like it,” Jessica says.

“Thanks. What’d you like about it?”

“I related to it. I grew up with messed up teeth, and I was always so embarrassed by them. I wouldn’t smile in photos or talk in class. It seemed all my friends had perfect teeth. But my parents couldn’t afford braces. Once I finally had the money I fixed my teeth.” I wince at her use of ‘perfect’ and ‘fixed’ teeth, implying *her teeth* were a problem, instead of the problem being the *idea* of perfect teeth, but I stay quiet and let her story be.

“I saw myself in the story, too,” Heather adds. “I hadn’t realised how little I thought about teeth until I read the article, but you’re right – our teeth are connected to our social class and we make class judgments about people based on their teeth. Even I do.”

“I worked at a dentist’s office for seven years and this American Dental Dream is real,” Anna adds. “We’re so obsessed with these perfect movie star teeth. I remember how patients would tear up with joy when they saw their dental transformation for the first time.”

“Thank you all for sharing your connections,” I say. “I believe this idea of ‘perfect teeth’ several of you alluded to is an illusion. The idea of which teeth are desirable, perfect, or normal, is a cultural ideal. It’s not inevitable and could be otherwise. Yet, this cultural desire is powerful. How many people in here have had braces?”

All but two students raise their hands. “And how many of you are completely happy with your teeth?” No one raises their hands. “So braces didn’t solve the insecurities with your teeth. You are led to believe your teeth need *fixed*, and can look *better*. This deficit discourse (Gergen, 1994) is what keeps the capitalist engine running. We create problems needing ‘fixed’ by introducing new products and services. Just think about how the introduction of whitening strips and braces changed how we understand teeth.”

“After reading your article I went and immediately whitened my teeth,” says Melissa. “I know this is the opposite of what you hoped but the pressure never seems to end.”

“I hate to be the outlier here but I have straight, white teeth and I’ve never had any orthodontics,” one of my favorite students, Dustin, responds. “This seems to be a sweeping generalisation. I don’t really see the connection between social class and teeth.”

“Well I do say in the article that straight, white teeth that meet the cultural ideal requires good genetics or a lot of money. However, many people have some sort of dental intervention. Look at how many people have had braces in here.”

“That’s why I think your story is relatable,” says Josh. “I had braces but I still have insecurities about my teeth even after my parents spent thousands of dollars on them.”

“Many of us have these minor bodily insecurities (Ellis, 1998) we rarely talk about and we each find our own ways of coping with them,” I say. “When we share our stories with others we can feel a little less alone in these insecurities.”

“I felt that connection reading your article,” says Tara. “I had horrible acne in high school and we weren’t allowed to wear makeup in my school. I was so embarrassed. I felt like all anyone could see was my acne. It’s like how your mom described her teeth in the article.”

“I felt the same way about my ears,” Derron adds. “They’re so big and kids used to make fun of me, calling me ‘Dumbo’, like the elephant. But then when I found out how to wiggle them, everyone wanted to see my tricks.”

“No way,” Ian says. “Show us!” We laugh as he wiggles his ears up and down.

“That’s great you found a way to reframe something you were embarrassed by into something you embrace and makes you unique,” I say.

“I related too,” Natalie says. The bridge of my nose is pronounced and every time I’m around my grandma she makes comments about it. She even offers to

pay for plastic surgery to get it fixed.” Several students gasp. “But I’ve grown to love it. It holds my glasses up nicely,” she says grabbing her frames. Several students laugh.

“People make judgments about my nose,” Lance adds. “People say I have a Jewish nose. I identify as Christian but my dad is Jewish, and I felt in some ways this was an attack on him.”

“I really connected,” says Lacey. “I have a slight eye misalignment called pseudostrabismus.” Basically my left eye is about two degrees off from my right, making me appear cross-eyed. After reading your story, I realised my eye affects my life in ways I wasn’t aware of, like realising I don’t have any selfies online because it’s most noticeable in pictures. Now I want to write my autoethnography about my pseudostrabismus, though a part of me feels it’s a minor problem and writing a 20-page paper about it is blowing it out of proportion.”

As she talks, I realise I’m staring at her eyes and look down at my article instead.

“Wow, thank you so much for sharing,” I say. “Your comment reminds me about the double binds of discussing minor bodily stigmas. For example, many of you may have never even noticed my teeth before reading this essay, but I’m guessing many of you tried to get a peek at them today.” The class laughs, my humour resonating. “Other responses?”

“I admire how you used humour to cope with your teeth. Like how you named your snaggletooth and snarled it at people,” Erick says. The class laughs. “I also admire your honesty, like how you write about stealing whitening strips from Wal-Mart.”

“Yes, your teacher has broken the law,” I joke nervously. “Most stores now have them locked behind glass cases because so many people were stealing them.”

“This discussion has made me realise we all have something we’re insecure about and afraid to talk about it, making that insecurity even more powerful in our minds,” Erick says.

“Yes, and I hope my openness inspired you to be open with your own stories.”

Hands shoot up in the air. “Your story made me think about...

“... the moles on my arms.”

“... being a woman with ‘man hands’.”

“... the stretch marks on my boobs.”

“... the gap between my front teeth.”

“... the scar on my lip.”

“... being a black woman with ‘natural’ hair.”

“... my skinny legs.”

“... my obesity and how I use humour to hide my insecurity.”

“... being a short man.”

“... my bowleggedness.”

The stories pour out.

How much to reveal?

“So what are you thinking of writing your final paper about?” I ask Rochelle, who shifts in her seat. I meet with each student individually to discuss their autoethnography. In these meetings students share personal stories and we talk through ideas, discussing potential ethical issues, and figuring out what they hope to get out of the writing process.

“I have a few ideas but the one I think I have the most to write about is my relationship with my mom,” she says. I nod my head, encouraging her to continue. “She’s crazy.”

“What do you mean by crazy?”

“She’s literally crazy. Like she cheated on my dad and completely destroyed our family. Now she drinks all the time and goes out to the bar with all these trashy guys. I figured I have a lot I could write about.”

“Okay, I just want to say before you carry forward with this project that I will be pushing you to consider your mom’s perspective, not to justify her actions, but to hopefully understand more about how she made those choices. Part of what we’re trying to do in this class is to write about experiences we haven’t quite figured out yet as a way to better understand, come to terms with, and cope with them. You seem pretty angry at your mom right now. But writing a story that only blames and vilifies doesn’t allow you or others to learn from the experience. I just want you to know that if you stick with this topic, I will be asking you to write through the anger and practice moving toward empathy.”

She nods her head. “I understand. Like I know she married my dad when she was really young and got pregnant. She’s said before that she didn’t get to experience those party years during her youth because she was a mom and a wife. That could be part of it.”

“That’s a good start.”

* * * * *

“You’ve done some promising work on your final project proposals, and I am thrilled by the plans for your stories. The topics you chose are deep and important – grief from death of a loved one, body image issues, family conflict, racism and homophobia, just for starters. I know you’ll be proud of the work you create.” Smiles beam across several faces. Many were nervous when talking with me about their topic. This class represents the first time many have been asked to talk so honestly and deeply about themselves.

“That’s a big statement,” Maria says.

“It feels truthful to me,” I add. “Reflexively writing and telling our stories is often emotionally taxing, because the process asks us to relive past experiences, some of which are difficult and maybe even traumatic. We then resist the human temptation to cover up intimate details, and decide instead to openly share information, baring our selves. There is no secret antidote for

doing this work, and storytelling is certainly not a panacea that miraculously fixes our lives.”

Students giggle, noting my flair for the dramatic.

“Your proposals also show me more of you are becoming comfortable with writing about personal, intimate details of your life.”

“What I am unsure of is how to do it, or actually, how far to go,” Alberto responds.

“I appreciate and respect your concern. The smiles and head nods from your fellow students tell me you are not alone. They also tell me today’s in-class workshop focusing on self-disclosure and personal narrative is an important next step.”

I distribute to each student one half-sheet of paper showing part of a personal story I wrote about bullying. Wanting to not discourage them from being honest, I do not tell them I am the storyteller.

“Please read through and reflect on this passage. As you move through the paragraph, pay attention to what you learn about the author.”

Students read through the following passage:

Noman smiles and nods “hello” as he sees me walking up to him during recess. He is a short Pakistani boy who usually keeps to himself at school. On this winter day, my eyes are fixed on his coat – a long, thick and puffy winter coat, bigger than any one I have ever seen. “Nice coat,” I say sarcastically, as I poke at his chest, by his heart, feeling the sharpness of my fingers attempts to penetrate the puffiness. Nearly inaudible, he mumbles back, “(Something, I think, about) cold and (something about) snow.” My pokes continue, and I yell, “I cannot hear you, NO-MAN, talk louder!” He acquiesces to my aggression, his body goes limp, and he evades eye contact with me by staring at the ground. Still not satisfied, I grab Noman by his coat, my boy fingers barely able to cling onto his puffed up coating, and pushed him against the brick wall. “Owww,” he says. His eyes are shut, seemingly to prepare for more roughness.

“Okay, what do you think?” I ask after five minutes pass.

“I think the author is honest,” Alberto says.

“Honest?” Rose interrupts. “What is honest about this passage?”

“Well, the author is honest about bullying Noman. There are no excuses.”

“Fine,” Rose replies, “But we learn nothing in the passage about reasons why the author bullied Noman. We also don’t know what type of relationship they had. Were they friends? Strangers? Knowing this information would help me know how I feel about the violence.”

“Sounds like you want to know more about what informed this relational exchange, which is important. Here’s another question: what do we know about how the author felt, or what the author’s thought process was related to this episode?”

“We know very little about that, except for what we might guess.”

“Right, we know the author attacked Noman, but we don’t know how he – I am assuming it’s a boy – felt before, during, or after. He’s a kid, attacking an innocent peer at school, someone smaller and weaker than him. Did that make him feel stronger? Did he regret the violence? I suspect some of those thoughts and feelings are not pretty, and they can lead the author to feel bad about his actions, or shame. But I want to know more from and about the storyteller.”

“Why would we want to know more about these things?”

Multiple students’ raise their hands.

“Wow, a lot of folks have something to say. This is great. Let’s just list off the reasons you have in mind. So, fill in the blank: “By knowing more intimate details, I will . . . ”

. . . know what or how I should think or feel about the violence. For example, the situation feels different if he has no concern about his harmful actions.

. . . believe the author more, or not.

. . . *be able to compare it to my own experiences with bullying.*

. . . *understand more about conflicts similar to the one portrayed in the story.*

“Fine work, you explored this so mindfully,” I say. “Now let me help you think about these issues in even more specific ways, which I believe will help you in writing your stories.” A few students grab their pens, readying themselves to take notes.

“Your reasons speak to the importance in autoethnographic storytelling of working to be transparent; of ‘thickly’ describing the lived experience we convey; and of disclosing enough for readers to have a clear and meaningful sense of what it is like to live and negotiate these relational realities and identities (Ellis, 2004). Overall, it seems, to me, like you want to be drawn in closer to the stories and the storytellers . . . to know both better.”

“You make us sound smart,” Alberto says.

“You are smart, and you can write smartly in these ways. It just takes time and practice.” By the way, I am the author of that passage. Noman and I were friends, and I felt terrible about committing such violence!”

A few students gasp at my revelation.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t think you would give all this criticism if you knew I was the author. By covering myself, I figured you might feel more comfortable saying tough things. Maybe I should have trusted you and revealed my part in this to you before reading.”

The students respond with a range of playful comments: “You got us!” “Very sneaky. . .” and “Glad I didn’t say what I was *really* thinking about the bully!”

Naked emergence

“I am going to miss this class.” These words come from Sophia, a student who has not said much this semester. Her speaking up now feels significant. She continues, “I feel weird announcing this, but I will miss the people in here.”

The class responds with, “awwwwww” and “that’s so sweet”.

“The class has been a very unique experience for me, and I think that has to do with more than just learning about autoethnography. I think it has something to do with how close many of us have become to one another, and who we’ve become together as a result of sharing some heartbreaking stories.”

More students nod their heads, though a few others doodle in their notebooks, evading my eye contact. I don’t know their reasons for being disengaged. Yet, their response is a reminder not all students will experience vulnerability in positive ways. Many uncover less for any number of reasons, including self-protection.

“Personally, I *love* what we have created this semester. I cannot remember one class in all of my years of teaching where students have without prompting begun reflecting on the foregoing semester weeks before the class ends. But this shouldn’t surprise us. As I mentioned when we embarked on this journey together, by investing in the course, doing the necessary work, taking risks, and being there for each other, something special would likely form. It has been an honor to work with you.”

“Well, thank you for being our fearless, towel-wearing leader,” Rose says dramatically but sincerely.

“You’re welcome, and thank you, you all led – each other, and me – in your own ways. That leadership has resulted in what has become a wonderfully supportive community of storytellers. Also, it’s been amazing to see many of you become more open, confident, and creative writers. You, too, have *exposed* yourselves and lived to tell about it!”

“I think I am going to cry. Are we supposed to cry in classes?” Sue asks.

“Sure. I should have known to bring a Kleenex box to an autoethnography class. Thank you all for what you have given me. I have grown as a result of our reflexive and vulnerable learning this semester.”

“You have grown, how so?” Alberto asks. Several others look confused.

“Yes, many teachers are impacted by teaching, too. As you know I am writing my book, an autoethnographic examination of bullying, youth, and identity,

which includes my reflexive stories of bullying from my youth”. (Berry, in press)

“So what was our help?”

“Since it has been over thirty-five years since I was a youth, at times I have found it difficult to identify ‘my bullying story’. By witnessing you take risks in writing and classroom discussion by reflecting on difficult experiences of hardship and suffering, I was moved to look more deeply into my bullying past. I heard myself encouraging you, and began to follow my own advice. I began to explore my past more gently and imaginatively. Your vulnerability and willingness to tell your stories, stories that matter, encouraged me to stay with my own process and to identify what stories from back then still matter today.”

“Wow, we did all that?”

“You did, and perhaps without even knowing it. That’s the power possible from relating with others in open ways. As I helped you, you helped me see my story in different ways. I am grateful to you for pushing me deeper into my story.”

Stripping down

We sit beside each other looking at the same computer screen.

“How do we end? What does naked teaching do for teachers and students?”

“I think we become more relatable. Rather than being detached authority figures, we are teachers who have personal struggles and identify with students’ struggles. Also, through personal writing, students are challenged to explore how their education personally impacts their lives. This isn’t abstract knowledge. This is their life they are writing about. This vulnerable teaching style also allows for multiple selves to be experimented with, performed, revealed and concealed.”

“There are also risks to this kind of vulnerability.”

“Yes, the selves performed within this space aren’t always desired or affirming. We’re often working through some distressing issues. Yet, the aim is to be ourselves and try to help people better our lives. Whoever we become through the process, we convey the joys and sorrows of our stories together.”

“We’ve also both had experiences with students that made us realise the risks and limits of vulnerability. For example, I taught a veteran student who never once spoke about his time in the military throughout the semester. During our early semester meeting about his paper he told me talking about these combat experiences in a room full of strangers was impossible, that he could barely discuss them with family and close friends. Yet he wrote and revised his autoethnography throughout the semester, at first only sharing his paper with another veteran in the class but eventually he presented his story to the whole class.”

“Others have worked on stories about deeply traumatic experiences, including homophobia, self-mutilation, and rape. Several rape survivors have shared their stories for the first time in my class. Many wrote brilliant stories yet could not speak one word about their experience to anyone, let alone deliver a final presentation to the class about their stories. While some critics might say ‘true success’ in this teaching should require students to be fully open, we don’t envision naked teaching that way. Honoring these individuals means meeting students where they are. Sometimes a one-on-one presentation between student and professor suffices, or sometimes submission of the paper itself is enough.”

“The outcomes aren’t always distressing. My students helped me find my bullying story.”

“And the most unexpected, affirming experience I had was when a student attached a letter to her paper telling me she loved when I spoke about how being an academic makes me no better than my working-class parents. She said that resonated deeply with her and she now holds that opinion too. This has made me realise how important it is to be my working-class self in the classroom.”

“The value of these stories extends beyond *Writing Lives* and other life writing courses. Shouldn’t any educator consider issues of vulnerability, reflexivity, and empathy in their classrooms, even in courses that don’t explore deeply personal issues? Of course what that vulnerability means and

how it is performed is contingent on the given context, like what the course is and who the storytellers are.”

“Are you seeing the parallels between autoethnography and the teaching we advocate? In each, issues of vulnerability, reflexivity, and empathy are vital. Autoethnography is more than a writing method.”

“It’s an orientation to the world. It’s a way of life” (Bochner, 2014).

“Autoethnography offers educators a more personal, humane approach to teaching and learning, putting students and teachers lives at the forefront of their education.”

“Autoethnography does more. It is not uncommon today to hear stories about lazy and indifferent students, or a lack of passion in higher education. In *Writing Lives* we saw passionate, hard-working students who opened themselves up in ways that allowed themselves and others to grow.”

“Sounds like we’ve found an ending. Let’s start writing.”

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Towards a humanising pedagogy: an autoethnographic reflection of my emerging postgraduate research supervision practice

Suriamurthee Maistry

Abstract

Postgraduate supervision in South Africa is a fraught academic space. The ASSAF Report (2010) indicates that supervisor competence is a key contributing factor in student attrition. The coupling of autonomous student and competent supervisor is far from being the usual pattern in South African higher education. Furthermore, postgraduate supervision workshops and courses seldom focus on how particular practices are likely to result in social exclusion, giving far more attention to technical aspects of supervision. This paper considers instead the unwitting ‘othering’ that has occurred in my history as a supervisor and gives an account of ideas and principles that have guided me in seeking to improve my own practice. I focus in particular on those elements or aspects of my practice that are likely to (or do) alienate and marginalise my postgraduate students as I engage with supervising their work. My paper records an ongoing exercise in self-reflexion, shaped methodologically by the tenets of critical autoethnography, as a means to examine potentially subjugating effects that I can identify in my practice as supervisor with a diversity of postgraduate students. In this paper I reflect on two important aspects of supervision: verbal critique and written critique. I probe these two aspects with a view to altering my own trajectory of development in the direction of a more productive level of self-awareness in my practice. I argue that a sustained, careful and considered approach to student supervision that understands and conceptualises writing as a process (rather than a product) has enormous potential for facilitating and developing student academic writing competence. A heightened sensitivity to the debilitating and demeaning effects of careless feedback commentary and embracing research supervision as humanising pedagogy have significant implications for helping students to negotiate the liminal space in which they must master the threshold competences needed for success in advanced higher education research.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a reflexive account of my induction into the world of research supervision. I attempt to probe my ideological

orientation by examining how, in its genesis, it came to influence my supervisory practice. I draw inspiration from Grant's application of Hegel's master-slave trope in the analysis of relations of power in the supervision encounter (Grant, 2008), reflecting on the way it can potentially enable me to develop heightened self-awareness as supervisor. I begin with a brief sketch of emerging issues, locally, and in the literature, which outlines the chief imperatives that frame my work as supervisor of graduate students. In keeping with the spirit of autoethnographic research, I present a set of relational ideas rather than a conventional set of research findings and recommendations.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal has declared its ambition to be a 'research-led' institution. The attainment of this vision depends on the institution's potential to expand its PhD programmes and the capacity of its academic personnel to service these programmes. Historically, the minimum requirement to supervise PhD students in the UKZN School of Education has been a PhD qualification. A PhD was thus the required 'license' to supervise PhD studies; attainment of a PhD was the right of passage by which an academic became entitled to supervise the knowledge creation process at doctoral level. This is a somewhat myopic perspective as it presumes that mere acquisition of a PhD automatically signifies command of the complex set of competences needed for successful PhD supervision. To its credit, UKZN does offer a formal postgraduate supervision course that is compulsory for new and junior colleagues as part of its Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education. This course covers a range of competences which includes developing familiarity with internal research policy, processes and procedural issues, going from research proposal development through to thesis examination. A question still to be answered is the extent to which this kind of generic postgraduate supervision course can address, in an appropriately nuanced manner, the notion of research supervision as a humanising pedagogy (Khene, 2014).

Drawing on insights from Paulo Freire, Khene (2014) puts forward the notion of a humanising pedagogy for supervisory practice in developing contexts. In a context such as South Africa, where higher education institutions enrol students with widely varying levels of preparedness for advanced PhD study, research supervision envisaged as a humanising pedagogy can potentially redirect the focus of supervision so that it centres on the development of the PhD student rather than on the ultimate product (the thesis report). This potentially progressive move appears, however, to be under threat, as higher education institutions increasingly shape their policies to conform with a

neoliberal agenda centred on competitive participation in the knowledge economy (Adkins, 2007). While the notion of postgraduate supervision as pedagogy (Clegg, 2014) has gained currency in recent years, evolving scholarship in this field has begun to indicate a need for more nuanced approaches to supervision that go beyond the traditional Oxford model (Burford, 2014; Grant, 2014; Wisker, Robinson and Schacham, 2007).

The post-apartheid agenda for higher education in South Africa has been shaped by a host of policy documents and reports that have emerged over the past two decades from the Centre for Higher Education Transformation, the Council on Higher Education and the Centre for Research on Science and Technology and the Academy of Science in South Africa (ASSAF). Recent developments and pronouncements emanating from the National Policy Commission (2011) and the National Development Plan indicate a strongly neoliberal knowledge-economy agenda for higher education in South Africa. This can be seen in the projected target outputs for PhDs, envisaged to increase from the current 1500 per annum to 5000 per annum by 2030 (National Development Plan, 2012). While the ASSAF report also signals the importance of strengthening the PhD profile of the country, it highlights institutional factors that need consideration if this agenda is to be fulfilled (ASSAF, 2010). An issue of particular concern is that the entities which are expected to deliver on this, namely the higher education academic fraternity in South Africa, which is severely under-capacitated in regard to PhD-qualified personnel (less than 35% of all academics). To build capacity, a target of 75 per cent academic staff with PhD qualifications is envisaged. This presents as a somewhat bizarre and cryptic mathematical formula which suggests that the existing 35 per cent who have PhDs should in the next 15 years supervise and graduate both the academic colleagues needing to be brought up to PhD level to make up the 40 per cent shortfall of adequately qualified staff and supervise the additional 3500 per year of new PhD students needed by the national economy. Very clearly, the postgraduate supervision context in South Africa is a highly fraught academic space.

National higher education policy and targets translate into ambitious institutional plans that have already seen a significant rise in new PhD enrolments. Whether there is sufficient capacity and competence to give effect to these grand plans is another matter. In South African higher education it can by no means be assumed that an 'always/already' autonomous student (Manathunga and Gozee, 2007) will automatically be matched with a competent supervisor, and the ASSAF Report (2010) indicates that supervisor

competence is now a key contributing factor in student attrition. Furthermore, postgraduate supervision workshops and courses invariably focus on technical policy and on the procedural and administrative aspects of supervision (liberal pre-occupations), seldom considering the likelihood that one or another supervisory practice is likely to result in social exclusion. To disrupt this canon, Manathunga (2009) urges that we should

explore how in supervision, we as supervisors engage both in compassionate, teaching strategies that guide and support our students' learning and in providing rigorous and challenging feedback ... where supervisors must act as both the student's mentor and supporter and, at the same time, the gatekeeper of the discipline ... to discuss, debate and re-think both the cognitive and administrative aspects of supervision practice as well as the emotional and irrational and the unconscious political dimensions (pp.343–344).

At the same time, Firth and Martens (2008) caution that there must also be an appropriate balance between the emotional and the rational elements of supervisory practice

The work of a graduate supervisor is clearly a complex undertaking in which 'risks and pleasures' (Grant, 2003) abound. In the remainder of this paper, I revisit some of the paths by which I have sought to arrive at a heightened self-awareness of how I conduct myself in my role as supervisor in this enterprise, and in negotiating the inherent power dynamics which are at play.

A brief methodological note

Autoethnography as a methodological approach in academic research has gained significant currency in recent years and its credentials as a mode of research are now well established (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Its maturity as a research tradition is signalled by its multiplying variants, such as analytical autoethnography (Denzin, 2006) and critical autoethnography (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014), to name just two. Critical autoethnography has particular appeal for me as it appropriates the tenets of critical theory and autoethnography in a way that gives me a critical frame for exploring my embedded and implicated self-in-practice (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014). My personal narratives are presented here not as any kind of cathartic confessional but in an authentic attempt at candid self-exposure of my supervisory practice. I attempt to probe my pedagogy, invoking the notion of a 'poor pedagogy' (Masschelein, 2010) as a means to unveil relations of power

at work in my supervisory encounters with my students. In particular, Foucault's inspiration, cited (in translation) by Masschelein (2010), that this be accomplished through a process of self-exposure; a self-induced vulnerability and a concomitant disposition of attention, presence and generosity as I engage a reciprocal, formative learning encounter with my graduate students.

In particular, I attempt to understand the dominant discourse that shapes my ideological orientation in research supervision with a view to disrupting and deconstructing hegemonic practices in which I have become complicit. Critical autoethnography allows me to apprehend ambiguity and contradiction as necessary conditions inherited from the hierarchical normative constructions of the supervision enterprise in higher education. Autoethnography is a means by which I can unravel the haecceity, the essence of me in my practice. I take heed of Manathunga's call for supervisors to "engage with a language and ways of thinking and being that enable them to critically and reflexively investigate their supervision practices" (2009, p.345). This, I attempt to do through a process of deep reflexion; through thoughtful, extended, calm yet intense cogitation and profound consideration and contemplation of my practice. I must concede though that it has been a real struggle to give effect to the reflexive project, as reflexion is a high-level competence that is likely to create cognitive dissonance; a traumatic unsettling as one confronts the notion of 'educating the gaze' (Masschelein, 2010). Learning reflexion is in essence a meta-cognitive process, imbued with a temporality that is determined by the extent of one's disposition to critical introspection.

Unravelling my own socialisation as writer and research supervisor - a narrative vignette

One implicit objective of this paper is to encourage modalities of research reporting that challenge the conventional canon – specifically, the modality of presenting a relational set of ideas rather than a report of 'findings' from analysed data.

I begin, accordingly, with an attempt to expose my own socialisation into reading and writing – tracing back my early experiences in an attempt to uncover the genesis of my ideas and my identity as reader and writer. Without venturing on a full-blown genealogy in the Foucauldian sense, I draw

inspiration from Foucault in seeking to understand how my current identity has come to be, with a view to its disruption and dissolution. What set of 'accidents' and discontinuities produced my identity? Implicit in this powerful line of Foucauldian thought is the suggestion that rather than being trapped by our histories we have the potential to actively shape them (Feder, 2011).

The socioeconomic circumstances of my upbringing, especially during my primary school years, shaped my early attitude towards reading and writing in particular ways. In my own home, there was little to inspire a love for writing let alone the development of any fine writing skill. Neither of my parents (children of first-generation indentured labourers) nor my older brother had progressed beyond primary school education, and my older sister dropped out at Grade 9 to seek employment so that she could help support our family. My family thus struggled with their own challenges in reading and writing. Being read to, or reading for family, were never a feature of our day-to-day life. The only reading material to be found would be the odd comic book (discarded by neighbours) and from time to time a school-issue reader, which I read only if my teachers told me to (and they seldom did). At the state-aided Indian primary school that I attended, homework, in those days, did not really come into the picture. And although the medium of instruction was English, the English language curriculum seldom went much beyond technical points of grammar and punctuation. In English classes, we did what was called 'Composition and Letter, in a special exercise book for this purpose, on mostly random, decontextualised topics such as 'A day at the beach' or 'My holiday on the farm', neither of which I could relate to, living in an inland city and never having set foot on a farm. Actual composing of text was not a skill that anyone gave any real attention to. If a written piece was free of grammatical and punctuation errors, that was quite enough to earn commendation. My high school reading and writing career was for the most part similarly stunted, with much the same emphasis in the writing curriculum. In my undergraduate degree, I majored in commercial subjects, where sophisticated writing skills were certainly not a priority; much more important was the manipulation of figures and graphs.

In the nine years that I subsequently spent as a school teacher of commercial subjects, I focused exclusively on the content of the discipline; it never occurred to me that teaching my students how to read and write might also be one of my responsibilities. In the first few years of my career as a university academic involved in undergraduate teacher education (commercial subjects),

my exclusive focus was again on the content of the disciplinary field that I taught, with only limited consciousness of how students gained access, through reading and writing, to the discourse of the disciplines I taught.

I was fortunate (or perhaps not so) to have completed my Master's and PhD in Education with a professor who possessed remarkable English language proficiency skills. He meticulously corrected each of my written submissions using the Track Changes function in Microsoft Word – which I duly accepted without contestation. The supervision model was the one-on-one supervision relationship: strong, powerful supervisor and subservient student.

With my PhD completed, it would be fair to assume that I might by this stage have developed some level of competency in academic writing, but as student I had not developed a level of academic maturity that made me consciously aware, at that time, of the learning-to-write that was taking place, nor, importantly, how this might influence the way I went about helping my own postgraduate students to 'learn'. In other words, I had not paid any particular attention to the supervision pedagogy being used or to my own thinking about how I was learning. I had not, in other words, developed a meta-cognitive awareness of my learning.

Nevertheless, successful completion of a PhD in the UKZN School of Education was a virtually automatic license to supervise Master's and even PhD students in cases where staff supervisory capacity did not exist. Because I was the only academic with a PhD in Economic Education, almost all Master's and PhD students wanting to research in the broad field of commerce education were directed to me by default. My supervision workload was well beyond the School norm (a circumstance that also fed my growing ego – a point on which I have more to say later in this paper).

Looking explicitly for ways to enhance my supervision skills, my next step was to join the School of Education PhD cohort supervision programme which was being conducted under the leadership of a group of experienced supervisors.

Lured by a liberal discourse: cognition - not emotion!

The PhD cohort supervision model that took root in the newly merged University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2004/5 was a model inherited from the

former University of Durban-Westville. The history of this cohort-seminar-based model has been documented by Samuel and Vithal (2011: 85), who note that “the pedagogy of research teaching and learning evolved into a mature doctoral cohort model within UKZN. . . (with) emergent philosophies of democracy, scaffolding, *Ubuntu* and serendipity as useful pillars. . .”. The programme had become known as a robust academic space, led by a core group of accomplished and powerful academics committed to increasing the quantity and quality of PhDs. As a forum, it had a reputation for strong critique (of PhD student work), with a developmental nuance, and could point to a string of graduates who had profited from the three-year cohort experience. A culture of frank, candid, open and direct critique was a distinguishing feature of the programme, in which there was much emphasis on structure, timelines, the supervisor-student ‘contract’, timely submissions and a goal-oriented focus as prescribed by the then Faculty of Education’s policy on higher degrees research. Govender and Dhunpath (2011), in what they describe as an exploratory study of this PhD cohort programme, comment on the extent to which PhD students learn both within and outside of the cohort community of practice, and, in a subsequent publication (Govender and Dhunpath, 2013), they highlight the need for the programme to cultivate academic maturity and student autonomy in the post-proposal defence stage.

All three of the well-documented interpretive studies which I have just cited of this particular PhD cohort programme were framed by liberal humanist approaches to research supervision (with its assumption of human autonomy and rationality) – a framing that unwittingly masks the subtleties and the subtext of the supervision enterprise. As such, the subtle and sometimes overt ‘violences’ that occur are ‘overlooked’ or outside the focus of such studies (Grant, 2003). There appeared to be a relative insensitivity to the fragmentary, splintered, and historically conditioned nature of the human subject in the research learning space. In contrast, post-liberal research on supervisory practices “seeks to problematise language, subjectivity, power and identity in ways that emphasise the fragmented, partial and multiple nature of the self” (Manathunga, 2009, p.344).

Aside from some anecdotal disgruntlement (somewhat casually alluded to by the researchers cited above) on the part of a few academics affected by the deliberations at cohort sessions, there was relative silence about the ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1979) being engendered with regard to supervisory practice at work in this space. As I have already noted, the defining feature of

this PhD cohort programme was the high-level, strong, robust critique that students came to expect in the forum. It is important to emphasise that in a high-level academic space of this order critique is a ‘natural’ necessity. Where tension can arise, however, is in the manner in which critique is provided or dispensed to the student. In this respect there appeared to be minimum concern for the affective domain or the individual subjectivities of students who were in turn shaped by biography, race, class, language, gender and ethnicity. Students were assumed to all have the same degree of resilience to withstand incisive critique and the same capacity to comprehend this critique, particularly in the first two years of the programme where student levels of academic maturity may have been low. While supervisors did remind novice PhD students that the critique was not meant to be taken personally, there certainly were instances when critique degenerated into judgmental commentary about students’ cognitive abilities. In my notes after the very first PhD cohort supervision session of 2008 with a novice group of PhD students, I mused over how several students were ‘cut down to size’ by the experienced supervisors. The power of these supervisors was indeed appealing; a power that I began to aspire towards. A comment regularly uttered to students without due consideration for how it would be received and interpreted (especially to students who had not adequately conceptualised their studies) was the rather blunt and abrasive “*This is not a PhD, what makes your study a PhD?*” Students who in several cases occupied powerful positions in their own professional work contexts were unwittingly and sometimes deliberately constructed as deficit, as not knowing, and while this PhD cohort had become renowned as a vigorous research learning space, it also developed a degree of notoriety. Resilient students endure, but not enough is known about how the less resilient, the more sensitive, and the not ‘always/already’ autonomous student responds in such learning contexts (Manathunga and Gozee, 2007, p. 309).

Of particular importance for me, though, is my own uncritical assimilation into the discourse and practice of the programme, a willing learning by apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975), in which I actively participated. As a new PhD graduate and relatively young supervisor I explicitly set out to learn whatever I could about research supervision through my connection with this PhD cohort programme. Not having come through a PhD cohort supervision programme myself, I was initially in awe of the level of engagement that took place and the commentary that emanated from the experienced supervisors. In my notes over 2008 and 2009, I have recorded instances where students’ presentations (written and oral) were systematically

dismantled to reveal its inadequacies (and strengths in some instances). Over the three years, I uncritically assimilated the style of supervision. What I significantly failed to discern at the time was the unwitting violence meted out to PhD students in each session. I also began to find my ‘critical voice’ actively participating in the unrestrained critique, flagrantly oblivious to the power that came with my position, gender, race and language. As such, I had scant regard for student biography, personal context or history, believing that these were peripheral to the ‘pure’ research issue that I was critiquing. In my second three-year cycle, I co-led a cohort of novice PhD students. I revelled in the power, eager to uphold the historically established ‘standard’: namely, that the PhD cohort programme was a demanding space, not for the faint-hearted. As I became more adept (as I thought) at providing critique (sometimes even treading dangerously in fields of study outside my area of expertise), it fuelled my growing ego. I was intent on developing and establishing a ‘reputation’ for being critical – which often just meant being dogmatic, insistent and unapologetic – blissfully unaware of the harm caused by my ‘friendly fire’, which is what it amounted to. The students, in effect, fell victim to my poorly directed attack on the misconceived ‘enemy’: the academic or research issue ostensibly under debate. Some might indeed say that ‘friendly fire’ is an inevitable risk in a combat engagement where outcome outweighs costs. For my part, I had adopted and internalised this potentially injurious ideological disposition and was now actively promoting a hegemonic discursive practice. There were moments when I positively relished the discomfort I created, especially when the students on the receiving end were themselves in positions of authority in their own right (and who sometimes carried assumptions of authority into PhD cohort sessions). An example of such a moment was when a new PhD student, (a principal at a school) reflected on the many accomplishments at the school since her appointment and the amazing relationship that she enjoyed with her staff. Her intention was to study her practice. My own response was not to acknowledge this but to offer a cutting and personal attack on the student with the following unwarranted comment: “*You appear to be over-glorifying your practice when you should be troubling it. So does anyone on your staff think you’re doing a crap job?*”

In Lacanian terms, I was experiencing a *jouissance* (Zizek, 2008) – a momentary (and questionable) surfeit of enjoyment and pleasure. I was walking a slippery, contradictory line, especially since my self-declared paradigmatic preference has been Critical Theory. In essence then, I was not ‘living’ the critical project.

As a ‘natural’ consequence, I began to carry this relish in discomfoting students through to my engagement with my PhD students’ writing. When I reflect on the feedback I provided to students on their written submissions (of which I have kept electronic records), the stark, over-zealous, aggressive, and ‘loud’ commentary is plainly evident, resembling a kind of ‘bleeding’ (as one student put it) in the ruptures inflicted by my red ‘tracked changes’ and overabundant comment boxes. Typical commentary on students’ written submissions included:

What is this?????

You appear to be confused!

This is unacceptable at this PhD level!!!

A very cryptic sentence - what is the reader supposed to make of this???

Unclear????

Rephrase!!!

This is a poorly constructed sentence!!!

Not sounding right!

This is rather incoherent!!!!

I was particularly impatient and intolerant of grammatical, punctuation and syntax ‘errors’, which often caused me to lose sight of the idea and meaning that my students were trying to present. Subsequent reflection leads me to see this as a reaction to my own insecurities as a novice supervisor and my own inadequacies as a writer and a teacher of high-level academic writing. A particular turning point was my exposure to post-liberal literature on the research supervision enterprise which I had begun to engage with as a result of my involvement with the ‘Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision Programme’ (SPS) funded by the Netherlands Organisation for International Co-operation in Higher Education. It allowed me to reflect on how I had misguidedly attempted to project (or mimic) a competent and confident demeanour, with scant awareness of how this demeanour was being received by my students. I tended to come on too strongly and aggressively at initial supervisory sessions, often ‘over-speaking’ about issues and concepts and over-elaborating on the elevated cognitive competences expected at PhD level, much of which was foreign to my novice research students. A critical

incident was my engagement with one of the key themes in the SPS programme, namely, that of ‘social exclusionary research supervision practices in higher education in South Africa’. This triggered a recognition of how I had in the past, made only the feeblest efforts to affirm the knowledge base of these high-calibre degree candidates, being more occupied with belabouring the ‘enormous’ gaps in their disciplinary educational research knowledge. Such pontifications usually happened at one-on-one supervision sessions with insensitive deficit constructions of my students as reflected in comments such as: “*Because you lack an educational research background, you have to work even harder, so what will you give up in your busy life to take on this high-level PhD study*”. This was a typical brusque and crude utterance that constructed students as ‘lacking’ and unable to manage their personal lives. Much of this positioning was done in an attempt to assert myself and gain the student’s confidence in my ability, thereby exhibiting my own need for recognition and acknowledgement. In my current practice, I do far more careful and attentive listening and constant self-reminding of how the construction of my feedback might be received and interpreted by my students.

In the next part of my discussion, I shall try to analyse the relations of power that might be discerned in the uneasy self-portrait I have just offered.

Towards a Hegelian self-awareness

In applying a Foucauldian notion of power as relational, one would argue that subjects are never in a permanent state of subjugation: subjectivity is in fact continuously shaped in and through power relations. In constructing subjectivity, individuals (in the present instance, supervisor and student) are always working within a context of constraint. At the same time, individuals are nonetheless essentially ‘free’ to act and react, although navigating relations of power should not be taken to imply that one can completely extricate oneself from the power relations that prevail. There will always be an element of uncertainty as to whether actions and reactions will re-create new relations of power or reinforce those that already exist. However, every ‘localised episode’ has potential to significantly disrupt and it is never certain which point of contestation or which discursive event will create a rupture (Foucault, 1979, p.27). In the supervision encounter, both supervisor and student are accordingly ‘free’ to act and react. Like Grant (2008), I contend,

however, that curtailing the analysis at this point leaves us somewhat hamstrung – which was also the feeling I had when, in another paper (forthcoming 2015), I applied a Foucauldian framework to an analysis of neo-liberal managerialism in higher education. The assumption that students may have the capacity, the confidence and the constitution to give effect to their inherent ‘freedom’ is slightly problematic since it dilutes the effect of ‘structural asymmetries’ on subjects in the interaction (Grant, 2008, p. 11). In attempting to now make sense of the power dynamic in the supervision encounter, I draw on Grant’s post-critical work in which she uses Hegel’s master–slave trope to analyse inherent hierarchical power relations in postgraduate supervision (Grant, 2008) . She argues that the master–slave archetype allows us to discern why it may well be necessary for research supervisors to engage the ambiguity that comes from the trope being “both disturbing and productive for supervision” (B. Grant, 2008, p. 10). She argues that it is entirely plausible that a hierarchical bond could exist between a knowledgeable supervisor (an institutionally determined disciplinary ‘expert’ in her field, vetted by the academic fraternity) and the new postgraduate student (being inducted into the field) and that it may be naïve to assume that both subjects can engage at the same level. In the relationship between the supervisor (master) and student (slave), two kinds of self-consciousness are at work. Each subject’s self-consciousness is possible only when she is aware of the other’s awareness of herself – when one is able, in other words, to see oneself through the eyes of the other and when there is a mutual recognition of the tension that arises as consequence of one another’s otherness. When these two self-awarenesses engage, there is potential for the creation of a new self-awareness for both subjects. Applied to the supervisory encounter, Grant suggests that there is a mutuality (of struggle and dependence) that exists between supervisor and student and that this is mediated by the production of the thesis – a dialectical relationship in which they interact interdependently. She acknowledges that although the master–slave trope may well be repugnant as a template for understanding the supervisory practice, it serves nonetheless as a powerful reminder “that supervision is not a free space but one productively, disturbingly too, structured by larger forces” (B. Grant, 2008, p.25).

What, then, are the implications of the analysis I have presented for my ongoing supervision practice.

Discussion and concluding comments

How do I best move to an appropriate level of self-awareness? Some of the preceding exposition could well signal a modest move towards self-awareness. But while absolute self-consciousness is elusive, I want to argue that one can nonetheless aspire towards a deliberative, meta-cognitive sensitivity to the way one is invested and implicated in the supervisory encounter. To reach this point necessarily requires a kind of attentiveness; one has to desire “a state of mind which opens up to the world in such a way that the world can present itself to me (that I can ‘come’ to see) and I can be transformed . . . a space of possible self-transformation or self-displacement” (Masschelein, 2010, p.44). Such a space for possibility may well be attained when we probe our pedagogy, or consider a “poor pedagogy” that may encourage us to explore attentively “practices which allow us to expose ourselves” (Masschelein, 2010, p.44). Of particular significance for me is Foucault’s contention, cited (in translation) by Masschelein, “that critique starts with attention, presence and generosity” (Masschelein, 2010, p.48). These are particularly germane points of aspiration that might convey me to a higher level of self-awareness, to a level where I can see myself from the perspective of my students and nurture in myself a compassionate empathy for my students’ endeavours to navigate new intellectual terrain. Kamler and Thomson remind us that “the novice researcher enters what we call occupied territory – with all the imminent danger that this metaphor implies – including possible ambushes, barbed wire fences, and unknown academics who patrol the boundaries of the already occupied territories” (Kamler and Thomson, 2008, p.29). Over-zealous, condescending and dispassionate supervisors (like myself) are likely to compound this challenge. A nuanced understanding and recognition of this is thus important if I wish to create an enabling research learning space.

My new awareness of myself in my supervision practice falls well short of an epiphany. Rather, it has been a combination of factors working in concert over a period of time that has triggered the revelation of ‘me’ in my own eyes and ‘me’ in the eyes of others. I have been fortunate to have worked in a range of research teaching and learning spaces (seminars, cohort supervision sessions, co-supervision sessions) with colleagues at the university who have commented critically on my style and approach to supervision. Their critique was initially not always well received by me, especially during my ‘ego trip’ phase. Thinking back, a material trigger was the look of despair that I began

to notice on the faces of my various students when they were on the receiving end of the caustic, abrasive, stinging critique that I chose to deliver. Another telling trend was the reluctance of some students to make and honour supervision appointments or submit draft versions for discussion. A more overt indicator of my self-alienation was the reluctance of colleagues to nominate me as examiner of their students' work, either in formal assessment of postgraduate proposals (which entailed an oral defence) or for completed theses. This was an unsettling period for me, with a good deal of angst, since critical introspection and self-diagnosis were not my strong suites. My more recent exposure to post-liberal literature, coupled with readings on teaching writing as process and on the power of formative feedback, has certainly helped me rethink my approach to both my students and my colleagues. With students' writing, I have become more aware of the need to focus on the ideas and arguments being constructed, and I am learning to resist the temptation to correct technical aspects of language. I also remember to give praise and affirmation where they are due.

Arguably the most significant 'adjustment' in my approach has been a heightened appreciation of the need to create enabling conditions for intellectual development of the human subjects I am privileged to work with, rather than being doggedly focused on ultimate delivery of the technical product (the thesis). I now understand better than before that doctoral study is both text work and identity work, that doctoral students develop their own identities through textual construction (Kamler and Thomson, 2008). It is still early days to draw any conclusions about the effect that my shifted perspective might be having on my students and colleagues. I have, however, learnt that deep introspection can be traumatic. It has created a kind of dissonance in me that has been quite disconcerting. My learning curve continues to be particularly steep and I do have lapses where I default to my old ways – which, thankfully, seems to be happening less and less frequently.

All said, I do not choose to offer 'recommendations' (about a humanising pedagogy) such as one might expect in a conventional research paper. Perhaps the paper then falls short of expectations when read against its title. But what I do hope is that this reflective account will find resonance with fellow supervisors, both veterans and novices, and that they may find benefit in a raised self-awareness of their presence in the supervisory encounter. Contemplation of a humanising pedagogy has been my learning path in the endeavour to be more human in the supervisory encounter. Although I have, since 2008, seen through to completion, the work of ten Master's graduates

(two *cum laude*) and four PhD graduates, I continue to ponder the ‘collateral damage’ I may have inflicted in the process. I am however mindful of Grant’s insights that self-awareness develops through a process of mutual recognition and struggle.

Foucault’s insights continue to be a source of inspiration for me.

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Seminar papers

Surname, Initial(s). Year. Title: additional title information.
Unpublished seminar paper. Location of university: name of university, name of department, programme or unit.

Conference papers (unpublished)

Surname(s), Initial(s). Year. Title: additional title information.
Description of occasion (including the nature and subject of the conference or meeting, name of the society or group, the place at which it was held and the date(s) on which it was held).

Duplicated materials

Surname(s), Initial(s). Year. Title: additional title information.
Description of material. Location of issuing body: name of issuing body.

Interviews

Surname of person interviewed, Initial(s). Year. Interviewed by initial(s) and surname of interviewer. Place where interview occurred, further details of date (day and month). Details of location of transcript, if available.

Personal communications

Surname of person with whom communicated, Initial(s). Year.
Description of communication, further details of date (day, month).

Microforms, audio-visual material, CD-ROMs etc.

As for works above but with the addition of the format in square brackets at the end of the reference, e.g. [Microfilm] or [Videotape] or [CD-ROM], etc.

Online sources of information (published or unpublished)

Surname(s), Initial(s). Year of publication. *Title*. Version (if any). Place of publication: Publisher.

<Address of web page between> Day, month (and year if different to publication year) of visit to site.

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Frequently asked questions

Is the Journal of Education SAPSE accredited?

Yes

How many issues per year?

In terms of a recent policy decision, we aim to produce at least two 'normal' editions of the journal each year in addition to at least two special issues (one of which will be the SAERA Special Edition).

Most journals now have a per article fee which contributors are required to meet should their articles be accepted. Does the Journal of Education levy such charges?

Yes. This step was necessary to cover the costs of the increased number of issues each year. A levy of R3 000 per article will be applied to successful articles submitted to our office. The central research offices in most institutions of higher education routinely arrange for such payments to be made. We encourage individual authors who do not have such cover to contact us.

Are articles peer reviewed?

Yes. Our goal is for articles to be refereed by three experts in the field.

What is the waiting period after submission?

Referees provide their crucially important service for no reward, and are sometimes unable to oblige on time but we endeavour to respond within three months.

Can I send my submission by e-mail?

Yes. The electronic version of the article should be sent as an email attachment.

To what extent should an article being submitted be presented in 'the style' of the journal?

Citation and referencing should be in the style of the journal (see the previous section 'Notes for Contributors'). Authors are not expected to reproduce the particular fonts and font sizes used in the journal, but the levels of headings and subheadings should be clear. With regard to the electronic version of the article, we prefer as little formatting as possible.

Does the journal have a policy to encourage and support budding novice researchers?

Unfortunately not – this is simply beyond our capacity. While we welcome extended comment that referees may be able to offer, we cannot impose on their good services beyond the expectation of an overall judgement on the article, together with brief justification of that judgement.

What is the rate of acceptance/rejection?

The following statistics for 2013 and 2014 provide an indication of the pattern of acceptance/non acceptance:

Year	Accepted with no or minor revisions	Accepted after revisions	Not accepted
2013	0	8	34
2014	0	14	38

Even an increase in the number of issues each year will not keep pace with the ever-increasing number of submissions. We can do little to mitigate the competition engendered by state funding policy and the kinds of incentive schemes that have become a feature of the higher education landscape.

Is there an appeal mechanism should my article not be accepted?

Beyond summarizing reasons for rejection – where applicable – we regret that we are unable to enter into detailed discussion on decisions reached by the Editorial Committee on the basis of referee reports.

The journal describes itself as providing “a forum for scholarly understanding of the field of education”. What does this really mean?

We understand this as implying that articles should represent a rigorous enquiry (conducted through argumentation or empirically) into the understanding of educational issues. Such inquiry originates in a problem rather than a solution, and it is rare for such enquiry to have no reference to, or engagement with, a broader literature and theory. Advocacy in the form of prescriptions or ‘how to do it’ recipe knowledge for practitioners seldom finds favour with referees. The question of audience is key. The assumed audience is the collective body of researchers rather than those more narrowly concerned with the effective implementation of specific policies.

Recent non-acceptances include a high proportion of undeveloped research reports, summaries of dissertations, and even sound but small-scale case studies that are purely context specific and unconnected with broader issues, literature or theory. Similarly, even a successful conference paper is usually in need of further development before it merits publication.