Professional Learning
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Self-Study Research Methodologies for Teacher Educators

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Rationale:

This series purposely sets out to illustrate a range of approaches to Professional Learning and to highlight the importance of teachers and teacher educators taking the lead in reframing and responding to their practice, not just to illuminate the field but to foster genuine educational change.

Audience:

The series will be of interest to teachers, teacher educators and others in fields of professional practice as the context and practice of the pedagogue is the prime focus of such work. Professional Learning is closely aligned to much of the ideas associated with reflective practice, action research, practitioner inquiry and teacher as researcher.
REFERENCES


Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) http://www.teac.org/accreditation/inquirybrief/ claimsrational/claimimportan.asp


MONICA TAYLOR AND LESLEY COIA

10. CO/AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Investigating Teachers in Relation

INTRODUCTION

March 28, 2008

My class was so different tonight. Usually it is filled with the banter of teachers sharing stories about their classroom, their families, and their lessons. Tonight the class was quiet as we discussed their proposals for their self-study/action research projects. My students (teacher leaders) are struggling to figure out which voice to use as they write. I encouraged them to stop writing from the voice of academics or Researchers with a capital R and start sharing their own stories— with strong knowledge and authority as teachers. We talked about how they feel they need to put on the academic impersonal voice because they are writing about research, and that’s how researchers sound. They actually said “our own voices, our own stories could make us sound informal and dumb.” I now realize that I have to help them release their teacher voices and hence their own real stories and struggles, not a canned version of what they think they should write. This is scary territory for them. One teacher remarked that she is scared because what I am asking is for her to reveal herself and be vulnerable. They were so quiet today. I think I am really pushing them. (Correspondence with Lesley)

March 28, 2008

I was sitting close to one of my student teachers at a presentation by an outside speaker last week. She arrived with a large stack of tests which she graded during the presentation. She was, to my mind, “playing” being a teacher— including the rolling of the eyes at the idiocy of her students and the use of a red pen. It made me think of my first year teaching and how I consciously donned the role of teacher, meaning all the while to keep it distant from the real me. Then I thought of one of our conversations years ago when we laughed as we remembered how we did actually become different people after teaching for a while: Both surprised at ourselves when, now unconsciously being teachers, we crossed the road to interact with teenagers we did not know. (Correspondence with Monica)

People are “story-telling animals” (MacIntyre, 1981; Bruner, 2002; Swift, 1985). Teachers tell stories about teaching in order to make sense of their experience.

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These stories are permissible in the teacher’s lounge, the bathroom, or at the local happy hour. Teachers are comfortable telling each other stories when they are in their teacher roles. Storytelling, in their eyes, has its place. In the academy and within the research arena, however, stories are seen as anecdotal not “hard data.” They are seen as informal and of lesser importance than impersonal theories and research. Co/autoethnography is a bridge between these two arenas: a method that prioritizes the stories of teachers as ways of making sense or theorizing about teaching, while not discounting the culture of teaching that includes the use of quantitative and so-called scientific research. Co/autoethnography places knowledge construction and theorizing in the thick of teaching and reflection, rather than seeing teaching and knowledge about teaching as separate entities. In accordance with the pedagogical nature of self-study, it exists “at the intersection between theory and practice, research and pedagogy” (LaBoskey, 2007, p. 827). It interweaves multiple knowledges including teachers’ stories and experiences, theories, and research (Zeichner, & Liston, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Co/autoethnography exists at the intersection of these knowledges and this is where it gains its power. Our work starts with the privileging of teacher educators’ own stories of their experience teaching, but with the understanding that these are not transparent or unmediated.

DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY: WHAT IS CO/AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FOR TEACHER EDUCATION?

So what is our methodology? It is important, as van Manen (1990) reminds us, to think about the framework aligned with our method when considering methodology. A methodology is informed by fundamental philosophical positions on ontology, epistemology and metaphysics. Our methodology is an expression of fundamental philosophical orientations that ground our research method, tying the way we conduct research to our teaching. In this chapter we look at both our method and our methodology using concrete examples from some of our self-studies.

We started this chapter with short narratives written recently to foreground the importance of autobiographical narratives to our work, but also to illustrate aspects of our methodology. These excerpts from our communication with each other are part of the larger story of what it means to each of us to be a teacher educator. We understand what teaching means, and therefore how we might go about our practice more effectively by the stories we tell to each other about our practice. What we mean by teacher educator is a teacher who teaches others about how to be teachers. Thus a fundamental concept is that of a teacher. By this we understand that a teacher is a person with a specific set of characteristics and attitudes. While it may seem banal or even pedantic to say that teachers are people it is nonetheless crucial. First and foremost teaching is an intentional act undertaken by people. While this does not exhaust the possibilities or come close to providing an adequate definition of teacher, by focusing on teaching as an intentional personal activity we keep in mind that it is people that teach. Fundamental to the way we approach self-study is the idea that a person is a persisting being, one who has a history, and whose identity is complex (Palmer, 1998). Thus, Monica is a teacher, a mother, a friend and so forth. When she is teaching, her understanding of herself as teacher is often foremost but she brings all her identities to the classroom with her. Our self-study method is rooted in a methodology which takes these understandings of what it means to be a teacher as a person as fundamental. This idea of the teacher as a person with complex identities that are grounded in and informed by past experiences raises questions about what makes each person the person she is, that is, what constitutes her personal identity. Here we focus on the idea that what makes us the particular people we are, and thus the particular teachers we are, is what we care about: those things with which we identify (Frankfurt, 1998).

TEACHER IN RELATION

Our teaching relies upon the relationships we nurture with our students. Our concept of person is essentially that of person-in-relation. As teachers, we care deeply about our students. Whether we are guiding, critiquing, or disagreeing with students, we strive to do so carefully with respect and thoughtfulness (Noddings, 1984). Our teaching involves being in practice with others. Who these others are will vary. They will include our students, our fellow teachers, our administrators, and our communities. The important point is that the concept of person implied by the idea that teaching is a relation between persons is that of a person who cannot be understood except in relation to others. Thus if we are to study ourselves, to engage in self-study for the improvement of our practice, we need to examine ourselves with others. The importance of others in our practice and therefore the study of our practice undergird our methodology.

An important corollary of the idea of teacher as person-in-relation is that teaching, being a teacher, is fundamentally different from other professional relationships. It is sometimes overlooked that our students come to us not as problems to be solved, but as people becoming. Teaching is more a question of being with, or engaging with than problem solving. Unlike clients or patients who go to lawyers or doctors to have their problems solved or to be cured, our students come with lives to share and we help or guide and learn with them. Our students are people with whom we work. In this sense we agree with those such as Donnelly (1999) who argue from a Heideggerian perspective that “teachers should acknowledge and celebrate that concernful Being-with which is at the basis of their practice, and look hard and critically at demands for an increased emphasis on instrumentality” (p. 947).

CULTURAL POSITION AS TEACHER EDUCATORS

Moreover, teaching takes place in human society. It is replete with cultural associations and meanings. Our understandings of ourselves as teacher educators in the United States is constrained and circumscribed by our local cultural situations and the understandings of others. The cultural meaning of teacher educator is in part reflective of the low status of teachers in general in our society, but we are also
held in low esteem by many of our colleagues at the university, by national agencies, by the teachers we work with in schools, sometimes by our students who are less than impressed by the idea that one learns how to teach, and even by our colleagues in teacher education who often it seems, prefer to identify themselves with other disciplines. There are many reasons for this state of affairs of course, but the net effect is that our voices can be difficult to hear, and it can be hard for us to assert our own agency as teacher educators given that others have been quite successful in reducing our autonomy. Our cultural worth is similar to that of school teachers. We are more than familiar with cultural representations of teachers. They plague us in the media, when we respond to questions about our profession, when we enter schools, or when we engage with students. How can we find our voices when they are so often denied or denigrated? In trying to understand our own practice as teacher educators, who we are becoming as teachers, we are constantly aware of the ways in which teaching and teacher education are perceived by society, by the outside.

TEACHING CULTURE

There is, however, another more hopeful perspective of the teacher and teacher educator; one with which we are equally familiar. We exist as teacher educators within society, but we also belong to a culture of teaching. Our teaching culture does not always include all teachers: there is a clear distinction between technicians who follow recipe models to teach and teachers who accept an aesthetic or humanistic approach. Our teaching values our students as people. We understand the importance of the community that is intentionally formed in our classrooms (Wells, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Teaching and learning occur when there is a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student, when the teacher is teacher-student and the student is student-teacher, as Freire (1993) writes. This is our cultural domain: where sharing stories, trusting our instincts, observing and reflecting are second nature. This is a teaching culture where we are insiders but can also be outsiders at times. Our identities are complex: we move in and out of being “teachers.” Teaching is a role that fits and doesn’t fit depending on context. Often struggles in our other life roles can trigger a need to re-examine our teaching. Our identity as teachers requires investigation and we can problematize ourselves as teachers as insiders looking in but also from the outside in and the inside out. The interplay of being both insiders and outsiders to teaching and to one another as we dig deeper into our practice grounds our methodology. How can these subtleties be captured in self-study? In what ways can we investigate our selves as teachers and people in relation to others?

DISCOVERING CO/AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Fall, 2007

I have been reading Harold Rosen again and was reminded, not surprisingly of why I believe that, first and foremost language is a personal/political form of expression. Kids in London have the right to tell their stories in their language and be heard (well at least they did in the schools I was involved and at the time I was involved with them). This understanding of the rationale for teaching English is integral to the anti-racist and anti-sexist education at the core of what I do although today, reading Rosen, I am again aware of how my approach has changed over the years. It was so refreshing to read Rosen again and remember why teaching English was so great at the beginning of the 80s. We really worked with the students not only on helping them tell their stories but understanding the structures of society. A lot of that work had to do with showing students the political nature of language (who gets to speak; who gets to tell you who is right and who is wrong; who gets to tell you that your story is not worth telling). A lot of my work was helping students appreciate that they had a story to tell and that you have to tell it to understand other people’s stories. I was so into the personal nature of this (rather than the genre or other lit theory bits of it). (Excerpt from Lesley’s Personal Narrative)

Fall, 2007

I think language has always been an interest. When I became a teacher, I clearly understood, without formal training, that breaking the language barriers between my students and me would be essential to gain trust and to get to know them. I watched them intently to understand their expressions, culture, mannerisms, interests, and values. I began to dress like them, listen to their music, and sometimes speak like them. At the time I could easily have passed for being a kid. This interest and respect for them gave me a way in. My students respected me. We had a good rapport and it was the rapport that led to trust and eventually learning. They may not have learned a tremendous amount of Spanish and French, but I think they learned a lot about who they were and that their perspectives were important and valid. I helped them to find reasons to value themselves. (Excerpt from Monica’s Personal Narrative)

We present this uncovering of an appropriate self-study methodology in a logical fashion in this chapter but we came to co/autoethnography organically, as we come to many understandings about our teaching. Our methodology was generated from our own experiences of trying to find meaningful methods to investigate our practice. Having studied English Education and Language, Literacy, and Culture, we have always been drawn to autobiography and personal narrative both for our own teaching reflections as well as those of our students. We have used these vehicles throughout our careers in teacher education in a variety of ways for a number of different purposes. For example, we invite our students to write about their own life histories of being learners and schooling through the analysis of artifacts; to construct narratives about critical incidents during their student teaching, and to develop literacy autobiographies. We have them write these for themselves primarily as the audience as a reflective tool but also for us and one another. Utilizing these methods in our classes raised issues of authenticity and power for us. In response, we created informal writing groups made up of teachers...
that met outside the university structures (Ccia & Taylor, 2002). We also use these
types of writing for ourselves as lifelong learners. We write narratives to better
understand our struggles, decisions, and directions.

Although we invited the sharing of personal narratives because we knew
inherently that it would be an important vehicle for meaning making, we had never
deliberately examined the process. This became more apparent when we began to
discuss our work in various professional settings. As we shifted our lens to think
about this collaborative meaning making process among our students, our teacher
groups, and even ourselves, we continually found the catalyst was in the dialogue,
exchange and interweaving of the narratives and how these narratives moved
between the present, past and future, and involved cultural understandings of our
work as teachers. To examine this further, we attempted to record our exchanges,
through audio-recording our dialogue and reflections, and writing narrative
responses to the process. What were we doing?

Alongside the constant-comparative analysis of our collaborative exchanges,
where a variety of characteristics emerged, we turned to the literature. Could we
discover an existing methodology that matched what we were doing? Although we
both came from English Education backgrounds where language, meaning-making,
avtobiography, and narrative are integral modes of thinking and analysis, we felt
our process entailed something more. Additionally we were familiar with some
qualitative research methodologies and valued the fundamentals of ethnography
and the concern with being a participant observer as a means to understand the
insider. This was part of our concern with issues of authority in the classroom and
how these impacted work with personal narrative. We thought that participatory
and feminist research might be a better fit for our process because of the emphasis
on the voices of the participants. However the researcher still seemed to take some
sort of a leadership role when working with participants. In our group, the
participants are the researchers and the researchers are the participants. We fluctuate
between being insiders and outsiders. Unsatisfied with our quest, we ventured to
other fields of study, such as sociology, anthropology, and literary theory.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Combining the interests of both autobiography and ethnography, we found that
autoethnography shared some characteristics with our collaborative writing groups.
We deliberately emphasize that we identify some autoethnographic characteristics
that may be applied to our methodology rather than adopting the autoethnographic
stance in totality. Additionally we are aware that there are multiple interpretations
of the meaning of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) so we are intentionally
specific about the shared characteristics and their origins. Reed-Danahay states,

Autoethnography synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the
realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography
have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the
notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question.

The term has a double sense—referring either to the ethnography of one’s own
group or to the autobiographical writing that has an ethnographic interest. ... When
the dual nature of the meaning of autoethnography is apprehended, it is
a useful term with which to question the binary conventions of a self/society
split, as well as the boundary between the objective and the subjective, (p. 2)

This methodology addresses two important aspects of our process: the importance
of blurring the researcher’s role so that she is neither completely subjective, as an
insider, nor completely objective, as an outsider; and the understanding of the self
as multiple, dynamic, and always changing. If our writing, narrative sharing, and
dialogue analysis is driven by the intention of capturing the complexity of the self
as teacher, we needed a methodology that reflected that framework. Moreover, if
the self is not coherent, then the role of the researcher will not automatically be
solely subjective or solely objective. We needed a blurring vehicle to address the
blurring process of the self. Autoethnography, much like our own process, “is a
form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a
method and a text” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). Our methodology mirrors similar
tenets. As we compose our self-narratives, they are written both within the social
context of our experiences as well as for the social context of our collaboration.
The interweaving of our stories becomes the new, collaborative text that is formed
through the process of sharing and discussing our individual narratives. In an
important sense our use of self-narratives forms our lives as teachers.

Pratt (1996) describes autoethnography as “a text in which people undertake to
describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of
them” (p. 531). Although there are aspects of Pratt’s interpretation of autoethnography
that do not resonate with our method, as we write about ourselves and our teaching
we are constantly aware of the ways teachers are perceived by others and society.
We want to ensure that our stories are always understood in a larger social context.
Part of our own positioning as we wrote and shared is a response to the ways in
which we are viewed, treated, and described. Part of the idea of teacher as
person-in-relation is the understanding that we are partially constructed and limited by
the views of the larger society and culture. Autoethnography provides us with a vehicle
to examine our pictures of ourselves among the cultural portraits of “teacher” that
are created by others. In this sense we draw on Reed-Danahay’s (1997) understand-
ing of Strathern’s description of auto-ethnology as “doing an ethnography of
one’s own culture” (p. 5). In a sense, we are doing an ethnography of our self as
teacher within the context of what that means among teachers, as part of the inside
culture of teaching, and within the greater cultural context of what that means from
outside the world of teaching in society. We are insiders, investigating the culture
of teaching. Those who collaborate with us are insiders because they are also
teachers but at the same time outsiders because their experiences will be different
and their identities complex. The interweaving of the narratives allows the insider
to move from inside/out and the outsider to move from outside/in.
CO/AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In co/autoethnography we take seriously the idea of complex identities and relationships with ourselves and others. As teacher educators researching our own practice together we are holding to the idea that we have a special perspective in virtue of being insiders, but we have been, and continue to be outsiders in that being teacher educators does not encompass our whole identities. The multiple perspective taking allows for autoethnography. If our self is multiple, fluid, changing and individual yet constructed by the relationships we have with others and the cultures of which we are a part, co/autoethnography becomes a perfect vehicle to honor these self characteristics. Co/autoethnography allows us to be reflective and do self-research in a way that mirrors how we engage with one another as teachers and people. We are always insider/outsiders. Our understanding of ourselves and others fluctuates according to context and setting. While no one can completely understand another, we do not completely understand ourselves. Our understandings of ourselves and others can, however, be enhanced by composing our autoethnographies together.

We are not claiming that persons somehow collapse into one through this process nor that the space between persons is absolute. Co/autoethnography complicates the space between persons. We are open to the perspective of others in a particular way: we look to these as we write and re-write our experiences in the attempt to gain greater understanding. We captured this idea in an early study when we spoke of “writing into each others’ lives” (Coi & Taylor, 2002). We are most emphatically not saying that the co/autoethnographic experience collapses distinctions between persons, or between persons and their social, historical and cultural context. Rather, reflecting on the relation between persons and their context allows for greater personal and social understanding, and provides space for agency.

Co/autoethnography shares a variety of traits with autoethnography, but the process is slightly different. We insist on the role of the other or others in the research process including the analysis based on the concept of teacher as person-in-relation. Thus, while it is commonplace to say that autobiography is inherently social, it is also common for students as well as academics to fall into the individualist trap of thinking of autobiography as centered on either self-revelation or self-creation. There are good historical and cultural reasons why those engaged in autobiography give more credence to the powers of introspection than philosophers or anyone else is prepared to warrant, but we need to value both the individual’s perspective on her life and to recognize that this can only be understood by moving betwixt and between the culture and the person. We need both and can downplay neither. Co/autoethnography provides a framework for this work. The very close work that co/autoethnography involves, where more than one is engaged in the same autobiographical project narrows while not collapsing the space between individuals, and introduces a perspective that runs alongside one’s own. To reiterate: the “I” is always present and is distinct but it is not ultimately separate from others. This is because of the venture itself which is focused on the improvement of practice by bringing the self to fore, which brings us to an important final point in this section: Just as there are multiple perspectives on the definition of autoethnography and its use, we only claim to define co/autoethnography within the context of teaching and teacher education.

DATA PROCEDURES

The Essence of the Co/Autoethnographic Method

Conducting co/autoethnographic research involves the use of diverse data generating strategies. First and foremost, as we discuss in detail above, this research methodology necessitates multiple researchers. Co/autoethnography can only be conducted where there are at least two researchers involved. There are three other phases that are integral to co/autoethnography: the writing and re-writing of autobiographical narratives; the sharing of those narratives with one or more other person; and the discussions that emerge once those narratives are shared. These research phases do not necessarily follow a specific order: we move back and forth from one to another depending on both the theme of the writing as well as the context of our investigation. They have, however, become the pivotal ways we generate data for analysis.

Possible Data Collection Strategies

How these phases translate into data collection methods vary depending upon the location of the researchers/participants and the scope of the study. For example, of late, because we live in different parts of the United States, we rely heavily on the data generated through our communication via e-mail with attached narratives, our drafts on google.docs where we can write collaboratively, and our conversations on the telephone and the field notes from those conversations. No matter how much we can communicate via writing and the internet, we find our real-time dialogue on the phone is absolutely essential to process and discuss meaning. When we use co/autoethnography within our own communities, we tend to gather data by sharing written narratives and reflections, and audio-recording our dialogue sessions. Hence some of the researchers’ possible data for co/autoethnography include: copies of written narratives and reflections on the process, transcribed audio-tapes of the sharing sessions, printed e-mail exchanges, drafts of collaborative writing on google.docs, and field notes from our phone call discussions.

Data Analysis

As the data are collected, they are analyzed simultaneously by all of the researchers. The mode of the analysis is collaborative, reflective, and participatory. The analysis involves the perspective of more than one person and is in search of deep insights about teaching. The analysis is participatory in that, as Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen (2007) write, “the dualisms of theory and practice, subject and object, and research and teaching are collapsed” (p. 25). We examine the data through the blurred lens of a researcher/participant, a subject/object or an insider/outsider.
Together we analyze the data inductively by means of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We attempt to continually break down, compare, and contrast the data in order to form “a spiral or dialectical pattern” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 223). We investigate the data searching for patterns or themes that emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We triangulate one data source against another for trustworthiness to ensure validity (Gordon, 1980). As we find patterns, we develop codes so that we can categorize other data accordingly. Once we identify the patterns, we move back to the literature and research for further interpretation and explanation. Ultimately we strive to “build a theory for the work” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 223).

Trustworthiness

Because co/autoethnography relies so heavily on collaboration with others, the issue of the trustworthiness of this methodology is inherently of central concern. We use the term trustworthiness (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002) rather than validity to reflect the qualitative nature of our research. We began to use co/autoethnography because we recognized the analytical power of our collaboration. No longer would we simply reflect on and analyze our own narratives alone but instead we would have others and their narratives in dialogue that would move us to new and deeper understandings of our teaching experiences (LaBoskey, 2007). Our research is trustworthy because it is conducted collaboratively with multiple researchers who share similar goals of better understanding and re-shaping their teaching (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). The new perspectives on our teaching through co/autoethnography could also indicate the trustworthiness of our methodology.

Representation of Findings

Our co/autoethnographies are cumbersome to present in traditional research report formats because these formats tend to be univocal and written from solely a scholarly perspective. We strive to find creative modes to share our research that highlight both our individual voices as well as the spaces within. Additionally we attempt to craft accounts of our research that combine our personal narratives, theoretical understandings, and data analysis and conclusions. We feel fortunate to have found the S-STEP SIG of AERA because it has provided us with a community that embraces the representative blending of our multiple selves as teacher educators. This support encourages us to continue to present and publish our research in the larger context of teacher education. Besides the academic community, we disseminate our method in our work as teacher educators. Although we have used this method as teacher educators to study our own practice, we believe it is similarly useful for the practicing teachers with whom we work. Monica, for example, is currently teaching a new graduate course on self-study and action research in teacher leadership. She has three students who are conducting their own self-studies using similar co/autoethnographic methods. As part of their preparation for this work they have read some of our work.

Strengths

We hope one of the strengths of the methodology has already become apparent: It allows us to live and examine the complexities of teaching while not requiring a severe simplification of the practice of teaching. As we shall show in the exemplar, the kinds of questions this method fosters and allows us to address are different from other types of research: we are, in an important sense, looking at the layering or interweaving of our selves-in-relation to uncover and better understand aspects of our teaching. This is not to say that in that process we are not concerned with and eschew the concrete but that these issues arise from an understanding of teaching as a complex messy practice at the center of which are people-in-relation. This method requires us to stay at that level of complexity and not fragment or reduce the practice to constituent parts. At this level, we are able to examine a continuum of conclusions that are neither all positive or all negative. We are able to discuss our struggles and challenges as well as new insights. This is not to say, of course, that the method is not suited to consideration of an aspect of teaching such as the choice of a teaching strategy. For example, in the discussion of the study that follows, the choice of certain strategies used to negotiate authority with students was shown to be effective but only after the data had been collected and analyzed.

It was only after months of work on the personal history of the researchers alongside the classroom dynamics of the classroom in social and political context that we could come to this conclusion. In the final analysis it became clear that the classroom interactions could be understood in a different way that made sense of many of the participants’ contributions. This suggested that certain strategies that had been used were successful.

This method of researching one’s own practice is appealing to anyone interested in looking at teaching from the perspective that the teaching involves more than a narrow definition of either teaching or the teacher. It is appealing to those who see researching one’s own practice as involving a multidimensional historical and social perspective that centrally involves more than the teaching self. It gives weight to the teacher educator’s experience and voice. The telling of the experience by the person who had the experience is given epistemological weight and privilege, but it is recognized that each of us is not transparent to ourselves and that others can and do add to our understanding of ourselves. Moreover it does not see teaching as a practice occurring in a social vacuum. The personal understanding of our success, failure and all the challenges we face in the classroom are to some extent socially constructed by the public understanding of teaching people to be teachers. This method affords importance to this perspective as well.

Limitations

In common with all research, co/autoethnography requires a great deal of the researcher. One of the methodological stances underpinning this approach is the
idea of person-in-relation. This requires a trusting relationship between those conducting the research. Building and sustaining this relationship takes time, a willingness to be open to others and an interest in engaging in autobiographical work with one’s self and others. It is important to stress that it involves more than researching together or admitting another to the research process: it is a project that involves working actively with the spaces between people to increase common understanding of issues around teaching. This can be seen as a limitation as well as a strength. We spoke above about using this method with our students. We have found that it does not always work with students given the relatively short time we are with them and that they have to build relationships with each other. This commitment to the relationship between the researchers seems necessary to us and so where it is not present, co/autoethnography would not be a good choice of research method.

Another limitation is that since the issues are complex, the analysis and reflection on the data takes a considerable amount of time. In a very real sense we have often had the problem of not knowing when the research started and when it is finished. Co/autoethnographic research could continue indefinitely. This is reflective of the nature of persons and the nature of the practice of teaching. Tolerance of ambiguity is a virtue in undertaking co/autoethnographic research.

It may be thought that we are missing the elephant in the room talking of these specific limitations. Surely, one could ask, isn’t the limitation that co/autoethnographic research falls in the solipsistic trap of all self-referential work. As Roth (2005) says, “[I]nvestigating the Self, or rather, our actions, gives us access to the ways in which culture is concretely realized. At the same time, we are too close to ourselves, which gives rise to the possibility that we do not find the distance required for critically interrogating our own sense-making” (p. 19). Whereas Roth sees the only way out as the “constant interrogation of one’s own presuppositions, and the interrogation of the presuppositions underlying the interrogation process” (p. 20), we find in co/autoethnography another route, one suggested, we contend, by our common histories in feminism. We started with and continue with the idea of collective dialogue that provides the basis upon which we identify aspects of our practice and work to understand them. While there are important and obvious differences between women working to understand and overcome their oppression and teacher educators working to understand and improve their practice, the collaborative working on our own histories to understand our current work draws from the former as we work with the latter.

AN EXEMPLAR STUDY: A CO/AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AUTHORITY

Here we present an example of one of our co/autoethnographic studies on authority in the classroom (Coia & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Coia, 2006) where we each conducted a study in our own classrooms but ended up focusing on issues of authority as they arose in one of Monica’s graduate classes. We present this example through two lenses: we summarize and describe the actual study and then highlight characteristics of co/autoethnographic self-study research.

As we emphasized above in the methodology description, our research process is relatively organic and therefore not a cookie-cutter model. Each time we conduct research our path varies depending on the topic and what transpires when we begin the study. Sometimes we begin with a question or focus and that is followed throughout the study. Other times we begin with a focus and diverge from it depending on the context of the research.

Background of the Study

In this particular example, we initiated the study with the intention of examining whether or not it is possible to teach democratically. This question shifted to “what does authority mean in the democratic classroom? In particular, what is our authority as teachers in relation to the authority of the students?” (Taylor & Coia, 2006, p. 54). We were interested in the ways that our teaching addressed authority in the classroom. We hoped to examine this topic from two perspectives: the abstract question of whether or not authority could be shared between teacher and students and the more practical question of determining which teaching strategies facilitate the sharing of authority. We recognized that we came from feminist and social justice orientations but we wondered if they were transparent to our students. We began the study hoping to examine these questions in two courses, in Monica’s doctoral course at a large state university in the Northeast, and in Lesley’s undergraduate course in a small liberal arts women’s college in the South. As we began our data collection and discussion, we found ourselves gravitating towards the data generated from Monica’s teaching, as this is where many of the issues of authority emerged.

We found ourselves slightly diverging from the original research plan because of necessity. Monica needed to focus on the challenges with which she was grappling in her course. As we tried to articulate our co/autoethnographic research process in looking at authority in her course, we began to examine our own collaborative process and through the lens and analysis of our own research process, we were better able to understand what occurred in her course. In other words, making sense of co/autoethnography gave us a new way to look at authority and teaching. As we concluded, “through our self-study research the research process became more center stage than the original intention of our study” (2006, p. 55).

Strategies to Negotiate Authority

Our self-study followed and built on co/autoethnographic research we had been conducting for two years prior to this study. The study of authority began in the fall of 2003. Monica hoped to focus on her teaching of a doctoral course “Race and Ethnicity in US Schools.” Lesley was planning to use the study as a lens for a variety of education courses. Over the summer, we discussed ways to more explicitly practice our feminist beliefs about authority and teaching in our classes. Monica considered herself a democratic educator, but she wondered how her students’ learning would be enhanced if she explicitly shared authority with her students.
She assumed, because her doctoral program is grounded on the principles of democratic teaching, that her students would be comfortable and familiar with democratic practices where decisions of curriculum, readings, and assignments are negotiated among the professor and the students rather than decided by the professor. Specifically, “she began the course with some selected readings and assignments but then invited the students to create the syllabus, select discussion topics, reading assignments, methods of assessment, and design the format of the class sessions” (2006, p. 55). She invited the students to negotiate with her about every aspect of the course (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992; Short & Harste, 1996; Stock, 1995). She thought that this might be an effective way of transparently teaching democratically. Monica had taught this course before and it had evolved into a negotiated curriculum. She had previously begun with a set syllabus and readings and then when she met her students realized that they were different. She then adjusted her course and teaching to accommodate her students’ needs and interests by negotiating the curriculum. She therefore thought that beginning the semester openly inviting students to participate in the negotiation of the curriculum would be beneficial for all.

What distinguished the first rendition of the course from the second was the decision making sequence. In the first course, Monica and her students made a decision to negotiate readings and assignments based on the needs of the students. As we reflected, “This re-negotiation was an authentic process that made sense to all parties involved” (2006, p. 56). In the second course, the need for shared authority did not emerge from the students, rather it was imposed by the professor. Monica started the course with an explanation of the democratic format which made most of her students quite uncomfortable. Used to a more traditional course format where the professor provides a syllabus and list of readings and assignments that are followed throughout the semester, the students were unsure of their roles in Monica’s course. Wouldn’t the professor impart knowledge? How would they know what to study or on what to focus? Some of the students seemed resistant.

Monica was surprised at the students’ resistance. She found herself facilitating a lot of process discussion with the students, especially setting ground rules for discussion and class format. The students struggled to self-regulate their participation and some voices dominated others. Some students became frustrated with the continual reflection on the process. They wanted to get to the heart of the content of the course. Both Monica and the students felt uncomfortable with their new negotiated emerging roles and they struggled for most of the course to come to terms with their roles.

Data Methods and Analysis

Throughout Monica’s course, we were engaged in co/autoethnographic self-study research. We generated data through a variety of methods. We spoke on the telephone for one to two hours each week after class to reflect upon the incidents in Monica’s class. Lesley shared anecdotes about her own class which helped Monica to gain perspective about her own experiences. We wrote field notes and reflections after each conversation. We also communicated via e-mail, sending one another additional narratives. As we described, “we began to write over and through one another’s narratives” (2006, p. 62).

These reflective sessions were invaluable but Monica still struggled to discern what was working in her class from what wasn’t working. In typical teacher style, she focused on the negative aspects of her classroom, which really came from conflict with two of the students, and disregarded the positive aspects which emerged with the other five students. Monica was concerned with the ways in which the difficult students disrupted and dominated the discussions. One particular student made comments that offended and silenced others in the group. Monica felt as if she was at an impasse.

As we collected the data, we continued to read about feminist pedagogy and conceptions of authority both for our pedagogy as well as a way to better articulate our methodology. At this stage we noted that “[t]he texture of our narratives changed as we integrated the voices of scholars and teachers into our writing” (2006, p. 62). It was in the combination of reflection, discussion, analysis, and reading that led us to examine the issue of authority in our co/autoethnography methodology alongside the teaching in Monica’s course. Investigating these alongside one another helped us to see Monica’s course in a different light.

Reframing the Self-Study on Authority

Examining the collaborative nature of co/autoethnography more in depth helped us to think about the parallel characteristics of authority in our teaching. We realized that we shared authority as we worked collaboratively with one another in much the same way we negotiated authority with our students. We reflected:

It is through opening ourselves to each other, allowing each other to write into each other’s lives, that we learn from and about each other. It seems that for collaboration, as with good teaching, there has to be risk and trust. It is in essence a caring collaboration. . . In a caring relationship, based on shared authority, respect, trust, progress comes not primarily through critique but through increased understanding based on serious examination of self and other. Our collaboration is possible because it is based on the relational authority that is constructed through our caring relationship. We share authority and therefore we are both responsible to exchange knowledge, inspire, and influence. (2006, p. 63)

Using this new lens of collaboration and relational authority (Applebaum, 2000), we began to analyze the data differently. No longer focusing on the disruptive students and what was not working well in the class, we began to think about the ways that community was being built both despite and because of the disruptions. Monica realized that she initially had trouble recognizing these characteristics of sharing authority because she expected to see them manifest in ways that she was accustomed to in most of her courses, somewhat smoothly and without resistance and she was distracted with the challenging behaviors of a few students. By
opening the space to accept a different rendition of sharing authority, she began to acknowledge that there had been instances of relational authority and community building. Several students took risks and shared personal narratives about race and ethnicity even though they were derided and put down by others. The students who were willing to take risks and participate in the community found ways to forge relationships with Monica and fellow students, even if that meant doing so after class or on the telephone. Parts of the class grew closer as they tried to together find ways to manage the disruptions.

Through this study, we realized that “caring and authority not only are complimentary but also need to be seen, as Applebaum (2000) argues, in relation with each other” (2006, p. 65). The teaching of this course was not in fact a failure but a complex learning experience that raised new questions for us to explore. We did not find specific answers or solutions but rather new ways to look at our teaching. This study reinforced for us that part of teaching is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. We concluded, “[t]eachers who do not share of themselves with their students are isolated from the potential growth that can occur in relation to their students” (2006, p. 65).

HOW OUR PRACTICE HAS CHANGED IN LIGHT OF THE RESEARCH

It is commonplace that teaching is a complex activity. Using co/autoethnography to deepen our understanding of our own practice makes living with and appreciating this complexity easier as we have become used to working closely with others in a research environment that values the messiness not only of ourselves but of our situation. It also honors our past and takes the whole person seriously. As such it has led us to a better understanding of why we act as we do. It is commonly appreciated that as King and Ladson-Billings (1990) say it is crucial for us to understand our own beliefs and ideologies to help students “consciously re-experience their own subjectivity” (p. 26). The particular kind of autobiographical work we do has enabled us to focus on this vital aspect of reflective practice.

Co/autoethnography, with its emphasis on the embodied person, does not neglect the role of emotion in teaching and research on teaching. "Attending to the role of emotions in the conduct and analysis of fieldwork is an important and undertheorized aspect of reflective practice", as Naples (2003, p. 199) so rightly says. Indeed a fundamental characteristic of co/autoethnography is the way in which it embraces the whole person by the use of rich personal stories in the search for meaning.

While success is difficult to measure, we are aware of a deeper confidence in our practice through an increased understanding of ourselves in relation. This has allowed us to take greater risks in our teaching. We have also become more sophisticated users of autobiographical narratives with our students. We understand our practice more thoroughly because we live the idea that teaching is a complex personal and political activity.
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11. COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Team-Based Approaches to Self-Study in Teacher Education

We know little about how effective learning communities develop, how they are sustained, and how teachers learn to work collaboratively throughout the enquiry process.

(Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008)

Many in the self-study, action research and practitioner research literatures highlight the importance of collaboration in the conduct of their various forms of self-study research, but relatively few make that collaboration the focus of the study itself. The literature is often long on the supposed value of doing self-study in collaboration with others, but short on the detailed description of the forms such collaborations took and shorter still on a specific analysis of the role of collaboration in improving either the process of the research or its impact on individual and collective practice.

This chapter looks at the forms, methods and impact of one model of ‘collective’ self-study, as implemented in a national programme of professional development for inservice teacher educators in New Zealand. The chapter outlines and analyses the contribution that incorporating a strong collective element in the self-study methodology made to the progress and impact of the various individual self-studies involved. It concludes that collective forms of self-study are particularly appropriate or useful when the purpose of the self-study goes beyond the improvement of individuals’ professional practice, to include self-study for wider community, cultural or organizational change, and that, while individual-focused forms of self-study may improve a professional practice, collective forms of self-study may be needed to change a professional culture.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on reflection, critical reflection, and (self-) reflective practice in teaching and teacher education is significant and growing, but it is distinguished by only the broadest consensus around what critical reflection looks like, and offers little around what might be the most effective methods teacher educators can use to develop or promote it in themselves and in their colleagues. Compare and contrast, for example, Hatton & Smith’s (1995) ‘essential elements’ in critical reflection with Brookfield’s (1988) ‘central activities’. Contrast Schon’s (1983) separationist views on the division of labour between practitioner and researcher in self-research with the unitary perspective of Carr & Kemmis (1987) and other critical action