Autoethnography as a Methodological Approach in Adult Vocational Education and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative inquiry intended to connect the lived experience of a researcher to the larger social and cultural world (Ellis, 2004) and it can be a valuable methodological tool for adult educators and learners. This paper explores the use and value of autoethnography as a qualitative methodology and explores the possibilities of its application to future research in the field of adult vocational and technology education. In particular, the question of what autoethnography is, and how it can be applied to adult learning contexts, is addressed. This is achieved by delving into the defining characteristics of autoethnography, the variations of the approach and its representation in scholarly work, and ends with current critiques that those considering autoethnography must consider.

KEYWORDS

Approach, Autoethnography, Experience, Reflective, Technology

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a rise in the application of autoethnography as a qualitative methodology in social science research. Autoethnography uses a researcher’s personal experiences (and the associated data) to describe and analyze cultural beliefs, practices, and social experiences that influence identities (Ellis, 2004; Wall, 2008). Despite it being “unusual for academics to expose their doubts, fears and potential weaknesses” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 852), the growth of autoethnography is due in part to its appeal as a unique form of reflective ethnography that connects a researcher’s own lived experiences and perspectives to the social and cultural world in which they exist (Ellis, 2004; Davies, 2008; Holman Jones, 2005). The approach requires the researcher/participant to critically examine the recursive relationship between themselves and historical events, social structures, and cultural practices (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000). This means that attention is given to critical self-reflexivity that heightens one’s awareness or consciousness of broader social inequities in society, which can ultimately lead to positive reform efforts to increase equity for all (Sparkes, 2002b). Autoethnography enables “us to live and to live better” because “stories allow us to lead more reflective, more meaningful, and more just lives” (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2011, p. 1). To accomplish this, autoethnography must inherently challenge the “normally held divisions of self / other, inner / outer, public / private, individual / society, and immediacy / memory” (Sparkes, 2002a, p.216). The result is scholarship that articulates the complexities of a lived experience in a way that only a true emic perspective can offer. Yet, how that is accomplished is still a point of contention for methodologists. Chang (2008) describes two autoethnographic camps waging a “war between
objectivity and subjectivity [that] is likely to continue, shaping the discourse of autoethnography” (p. 46). On the subjective side are methodologists like Ellis, Bochner and Denzin with their more evocative and emotional approaches and on the objective side are Anderson and Atkison who take a more analytical approach.

Whether an evocative autoethnography focusing more on presenting alternative narratives and stimulating emotion (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000) or an analytic autoethnography aiming to build on theoretical understandings of a phenomena (Anderson, 2006), autoethnography offers a way to enhance our collective understanding of the social worlds around us, as well as a means for deconstructing dominant, hegemonic ideologies and structures (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). Aligned with the interpretive paradigm, and a constructivist framework, it draws from critical theories of poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonialism, and indigenous studies. This methodologically transforming and innovative form of writing resists othering (Riggins, 1997); thus the author acknowledges and seeks to counteract their dominant position or role in the research process. Autoethnography is an approach useful for exploring questions about our socio-cultural life and the dominant ideologies that influence structural arrangements, social norms, and individual experiences including patriarchy/sexism/hegemonic masculinity, white supremacy/racism, classism, ableism, ageism, and heterosexism and homophobia. For adult educators the methodology offers a means of critically reflecting (Brookfield, 1995) on these issues in relation to teaching experiences.

Despite the potential for autoethnography to illuminate and challenge education and learning culture and deconstruct hegemonic forces and other invisible norms, it is still often questioned as a valid form of inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a, 2002b) or avoided due to uncertainty about how to apply the method. This article addressed what is meant when a researcher applies autoethnography as a qualitative methodology and explains and critiques its application in general and more specifically to adult education and learning research. It concludes with implications for future research.

**PROCESS AND REPRESENTATION OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe it, doing autoethnography means, “writ[ing] about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (para. 8) and often that process includes analysis of the experiences. Through a creative, intuitive, and in some cases spontaneous process that is shepparded by “methodological guideposts” (Pillay, Naicker, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, p.14), autoethnography illuminates aspects of the researcher’s/participant’s cultural experience as it attempts to make the experience and culture familiar to others (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography combines ethnography’s reliance on observation in the experience and autobiography’s first-person, written representation to make the researcher/participant central to the text (Anderson, 2006; Cerwonka & Malkki, 2008). As they lead the reader through a provocative description of the experience (Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Spry, 2001) an autoethnographer provokes readers’ emotions and thoughts in hopes of leading readers to question their own assumptions and perspectives on the ideas raised through the researcher’s/participant’s experiences. In this complex, immersive, theoretically informed first-person approach, autoethnography uses the experiences of the researcher/participant as primary data, the analysis of which leads to the interpretation of the sociocultural meanings of those experiences. Both hermeneutical ethnography (Geertz, 1973) and interpretive autoethnography (Denzin, 2014) provide a foundation for the sociocultural contextualized understanding of these personal narratives. There is no universal step-by-step guide to conducting
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