Practitioner auto-ethnography: Developing an evidence-based tertiary teaching portfolio

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Portfolios are widely used to document and assess professional development in tertiary teaching. This paper examines a self-reflective approach to critically evaluating practice and developing an evidence-based teaching portfolio through an emergent, evolving continuum of initial, life-story biography, evocative auto-ethnography and, finally, analytical auto-ethnography. This learning journey of a work-integrated-learning (WIL) academic supervisor highlights the development of an effective 'reflective practitioner' through a cyclical experiential learning process of 'learning through reflection on doing'. An holistic flexible approach to teaching and supervision is presented, that advocates student centered course design and facilitates strategies to engage and enhance students' learning. Effective leadership and mentoring utilizing coaching strategies and the development of intuitive good practice through peer feedback aim to improve the quality of tertiary teaching practice in WIL, and result in better scaffolding of student learning outcomes, enhanced self-efficacy and employability and a breadth and depth of graduate attributes.

Keywords: Reflective practice, tertiary teaching, portfolio, experiential learning

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Portfolios are widely used to document and assess professional development in tertiary teaching (Baume & Yorke, 2010). The development of an effective 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983; 1987; 1991) occurs through a cyclical experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984) of 'learning through reflection on doing' (Felicia, 2011). This paper examines a self-reflective approach to critically evaluating practice and developing the lead author's evidence-based teaching portfolio through an emergent, evolving continuum of initial, life-story biography (Angier, 2010), evocative auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2012) and, finally, analytical auto-ethnography Anderson (2006). This flexible interpretation applied to auto-ethnographic narrative (Angier, 2010) provided a framework that allowed the lead author to write retroactively and selectively on matters that have represented epiphanies in his 25 years of tertiary teaching experiences primarily as a WIL academic supervisor, first as a junior lecturer through to appointment to professor. A critical component of further critical reflection has been to inform the reflexive writing through gathering 'systematic observations' (Anderson, 2006).

Anderson's reflective writing and systematic observations are better understood with a measure of self-awareness as informed by the work of Bourdieu (1984), especially his concepts of field and habitus. Harker, Mahar and Wilkes (1990) defined Bourdieu's concept of habitus as "a set of dispositions, created and reformulated through the conjuncture of objective structures and personal history" (p. 10). Habitus, they stated, is defined as including a person's own knowledge and understanding of that world, which makes a separate contribution to the reality of the world. Field, according to Bourdieu (1984), refers to the content and context of a person's work. It is not neutral but influenced by their habitus and there is reflection on the struggle between habitus and field in determining their practice. In that sense ensuring a person's knowledge has a genuine constitutive power requires systematic reflection but crucially transparent interaction with significant informants (Anderson, 2006). Employing Bourdieu's concepts within this research enhanced the understanding derived from

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reflection on early socializing events and an exploration of the values and structures that were part of that development and contributed to my habitus within the field.

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

My particular field of academic interest is in work-integrated learning (WIL), an experiential learning approach that merges theoretical academic knowledge with workplace internship experience. Graduate employability is gaining increasing importance as an essential outcome of many degrees in higher education institutions (Yorke, 2010), and WIL has attracted considerable attention as a way of enhancing professional practice and developing work-ready graduates. WIL develops graduate employability by enhancing skill outcomes through authentic learning experiences (Jackson, 2013). The WIL student's reflective journal entails revisiting feelings, re-evaluating the experience (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993) related to activities undertaken, and linking the learning theory. Schön's (1983) notion of the 'reflective practitioner' is particularly applicable to the WIL process. He argued that reflective practice is a learned skill most effectively introduced through an experiential component (Schön, 1987; 1991).

METHOD

This current process of self-reflexivity in developing a tertiary teaching portfolio is presented as an emergent, evolving model of auto-ethnographic design (Figure 1).

Stage One
Write in a life-writing, autobiographical, stream of consciousness style to capture as many memories associated with the phenomenon as possible – also called *reflexive journaling*—a common tool in practitioner research

Stage Two
Identify career stages relative to the phenomenon being investigated.
Refine writing within these stages by employing an auto-ethnographic framework, reflecting on how practice has been shaped by broader circumstances or influences
Identifying epiphany experiences within the stages of career paying attention to any unanticipated transformative or other significant experiences

Stage Three
Provide 'truth of the matter' plausibility through triangulating archival documents, literature and conversations with significant persons
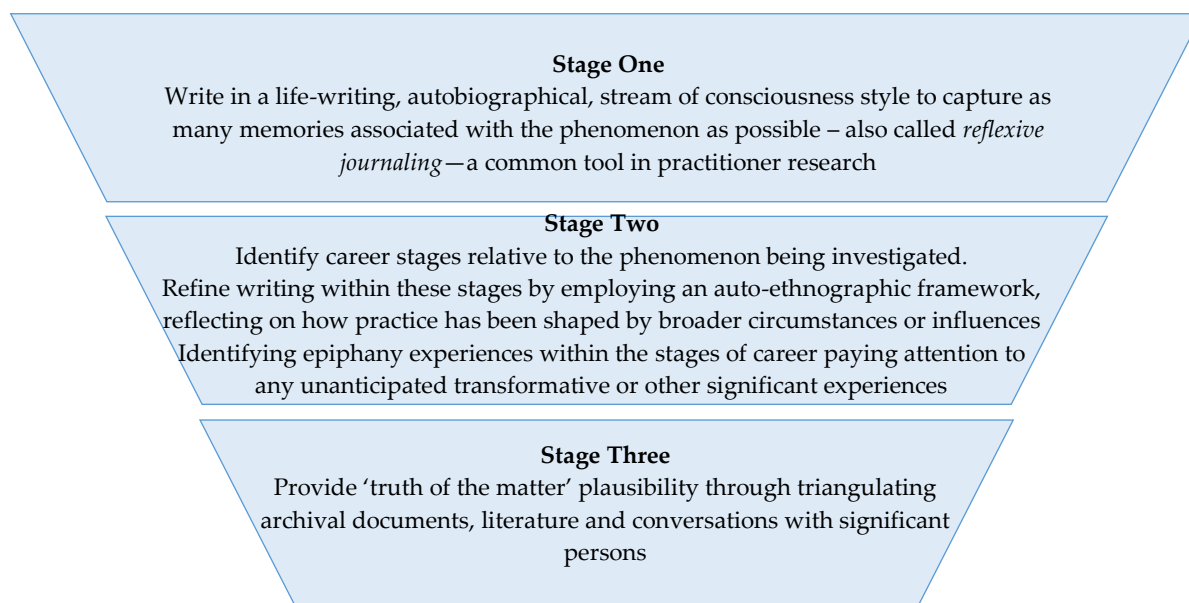
FIGURE 1: An emergent, evolving model of auto-ethnographic narrative (adapted from Slade, 2018)

The first stage was to write unimpeded about my teaching memories, including influences that impacted my teaching philosophy. This process provided a life story biography (Angier, 2010) of my teaching career. Stage two involved the application of a more disciplined auto-ethnographic style, refining my writing to develop a more reflexive understanding of my emerging teaching practice, and identifying epiphany experiences (Ellis, 2012) through the distinct career stages. The third stage involved triangulation with literature documents and conversations with teaching peers in the field.

This phase created greater rigor between the career story and the level of objectivity, and employed a more analytical ethnography (Anderson, 2006), which enhanced the credibility of the reflexivity writing in the final portfolio. The following sections present this auto-ethnographical process in developing my tertiary teaching portfolio.

LIFE-STORY BIOGRAPHY

The first stage was to recall memories of early influences on my teaching, which in my case was of the mathematics classroom at a high school over 30 years ago. This writing process activated memories that produced thoughts in relation to successes and failures and brought to the conscious level developments in my teaching career that shaped my practice. This self-reflexivity is important because it shakes off the shackles of the present, allows review of seemingly long-forgotten periods, and helps identify key aspects of the professional journey. These insights were first activated through conversations with a 'critical friend', which Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 49) define as:

> … a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.

This writing stage was also a period wherein I examined unsolicited feedback from students and conversations with colleagues and peers about my teaching practice. This process helped shape my memories especially those identified as epiphanies. These occurrences were events that provided revelations and realization of benchmarks in understanding of my teaching practice and its application within subsequent WIL and sport management teaching experiences in a university lecture setting. In writing of this type, Angier (2010), notes the need to both tell a story and maintain distance between the story and fiction. The following extracts from my teaching portfolio detail some of my early teaching narrative memories, which inform my current teaching.

> I have been a teacher, coach, and instructor throughout my life. I started as a school teacher, teaching mathematics at a sports school in England. Although I had loved mathematics at school I quickly realized that while some students were on the same page as me, excited by the nature of mathematics, most of them weren't, and to engage them I would have to present mathematics in different contexts: ones that resonated with the individuals in my classes. I struggled at first – I am a competitive person by nature, and so it was hard to acknowledge that I was not successfully engaging all the students in my classroom. After a great deal of thinking and hard work, I realized that the key to teaching these students was finding out about them as individuals and learning what sparked their interest. I became increasingly aware that social connections and feelings of belonging (Maslow, 1962) are often more important in sustaining students' interest and involvement than the activity itself.

> The lessons I learned in that first teaching post continue to inform my sport management work today. While students at university may be older than those first mathematics students, many experience the same basic anxieties. They lack confidence in themselves and their abilities and may wilt when confronted by challenge. Teaching is more than delivering subject matter – whether I am teaching mathematics, or sports management, seeing a student develop the self-belief to succeed is what keeps me excited about teaching, even after 25 years.

EVOCATIVE AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

The writing at this second stage included general observations and placed epiphanies, previously identified in the first stage of the writing, into a perspective that contributed to my reflexive understanding of my emerging practice within the WIL field. Ellis (2012) refers to auto-ethnography as a blank screen on which reflections are written. As a method of research, it requires observation and reflexive investigation with both the content and context of the researcher's experience. There is no pretext of detachment by the writer but there is a conceptual framework and discussion of theory and praxis. The method and goal of auto-ethnography, as described by Ellis, is defined as evocative (Anderson, 2006). As a narrative it provides a story that is personal, filled with passion that embraces personal thoughts, feelings and observations as a means to coming to an understanding of the social context of one's own teaching experience. The following extracts from my teaching portfolio illustrate the development of an evocative auto-ethnography and examples of the learning journey involving the teacher as a coach and a teaching philosophy based on experiential learning.

The teacher as a coach:

> I don't describe myself as just a teacher instructing specific skills or curriculum content, but rather as an educator coaching individuals. I think of what I do in the classroom in the same terms as my work on the sports field… I coach. Coaching is different to teaching – it is a more holistic approach that encompasses the whole person. Coaches impart knowledge and skills, but also help the people we are working with to develop themselves. Coaches focus on each individual as a unique participant in the learning experience, and provide the specific learning, motivation and resources that each person needs to succeed. This coaching style of teaching utilizes a more flexible, holistic student centred approach.

Teaching philosophy based on experiential learning:

> In 1996 I participated in an Outward Bound course. The organization's experiential learning approaches have significantly influenced my teaching philosophy and research. Given my view of myself as a coach rather than a teacher, it is unsurprising that my teaching philosophy is based on experiential learning, a cyclical process involving concrete experiences, observation, reflection, evaluation and future action (Kolb, 1984). Dewey (1938) advocated the value of experiential learning, but argued not all experiences are educative. He suggested that learning occurs as a result of problem solving and requires thinking and reflection guided by educators.

ANALYTICAL AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

The third and final stage was to employ a more analytical ethnography. Anderson (2006) describes five criteria that qualify a researcher to undertake analytical ethnography. These are "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, 2006, p. 378).

In terms of meeting CMR status, I am as Anderson explains a 'legitimate participant' (Anderson, p. 318), as I am fully involved in the process under discussion. In terms of (2) analytic reflexivity and (3) narrative visibility, my role of primary researcher with peers and former students made my position and connectivity to the research transparent. Seeking answers to questions about the how and why of the effectiveness of my teaching practice that would be deemed credible, required not only my

reflexivity but also in the manner of Anderson's points four (4) and five (5); namely, reference to critical dialogue with significant informants about my teaching practice, in my case former students and peer colleagues. These 'critical friend' (Costa & Kallick, 1993) conversations were significant in establishing a rigorous evaluation of my teaching.

Further to Anderson's position (2) analytic reflexivity I was able to cross reference the unsolicited feedback I had received from students with data collected anonymously through the formal course/lecturer review process (University's Online Survey Tool). This independently gathered data was important in that it fulfilled the 'truth of the matter' plausibility triangulation process considered crucial at this level (Anderson, 2006). It provided cross-referenced verifiable data between unsolicited feedback from students and what they might say as anonymous respondents. Within the data collection process, I was careful to explain my motive for the research as being my desire to better understand the processes in my role as a teacher. This transparency is important in ethnography of this type and ensures I was not somehow hidden but appear ghost-like in the writing in some omniscient way.

It was the transparency of this process and especially my complete member status CMR in the subject of the research that legitimized my authority and ability to write of those early experiences as informing on current practice with a compelling narrative. This process is a robust method for understanding an experienced teacher willing to be reflective in their practice. Being open to these stages of reflexivity allows one's own practice to emerge both within a historical and current perspective and is relatable to qualities associated with Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus and the capital associated with the teacher's contribution to their field. The following extracts from my teaching portfolio highlight a more analytical auto-ethnography focusing on three key aspects, setting great expectations, being a catalyst for change and leading a legacy.

Set great expectations:

> Early in my school teaching career, I was allocated a mathematics class the school referred to as 'the boarder-liners' because the students were at risk of not passing. I knew that aiming for C grades was not the solution, because missing a C meant the student got a D and failed. I challenged the students to reject their 'boarder-liner' label and to aim for B grades and higher. Despite their initial cynicism, this class embraced the challenge, with most passing the course. The success of this initial rebellion against the labelling and pigeonholing of students in favour of establishing growth mind-sets continues to inform my practice.

> The first time I meet with a new group of students, I challenge them all to aim for A and B grades and 'be the best you can be' and then work with each of them to ensure they develop the resources and mind-sets to achieve these 'great expectations'. Sometimes this can be daunting for students, but as a coach, I reinforce the fact that we're in this together, and that their classmates and I will make this journey with them. I emphasize the importance of managing and communicating both the students' and the work place supervisors' great expectations during the induction process at the start of each course. Showing students the feedback from graduates of the course provides added authenticity to the advice. Because many of our graduates go on to supervise other students during placement, this culture of setting high standards is reinforced across the community of practice. I believe that my teaching role as the internship coordinator, is the most important part of my job, helping facilitate the transition from being a student to becoming a professional graduate.

A catalyst for change:

> Development and change are central to experiential and work-integrated learning. This is no less true for me than for my students. Each cohort of students has helped me develop as a reflective practitioner. I don't change the students I teach, they change themselves. I catalyse this transformation through my interactions with them. My long experience of pedagogy, coaching, event management and the coordinating student internships means my approach is often intuitive, accessing experientially-conceived mental models for use in making instructional decisions. I use a questioning, critical thinking, approach to stimulate students' critical thinking, as advocated by Dewey (1938). This reflective process allows them to find for themselves the principles and assumptions that underlie a situation. Such a student-centred approach engages individuals, allowing them to contextualize their learning within the frameworks of their own experiences. It also allows me to respond to individual learning needs as they arise.

> Using the questioning and critical thinking approach requires active reflection to ensure that students remain focused and on-task, and I guide students to reflect on the learning process as well as the content. It is not enough to facilitate an interesting discussion about a subject. If students cannot identify and consolidate the fundamental principles that underlie the discussion, they are not going to be able to learn from it. At the end of learning interactions, I guide students to tease out the key ideas, and help them to develop learning notes that they can refer to when out on placement or after graduation. This experiential processes has a powerful impact on students.

Lead a legacy:

> My leadership reinforces that each group of students builds on the legacy of the ones before them and helps students to develop long-term professional relationships. The focus is on developing T-graduates (Gardner, 2017), providing opportunities to develop breadth of understanding, confidence and competencies to cross boundaries, and encourage discipline depth through analytical and system thinking, and problem solving.

> Recent research (Martin & Rees, 2018) has shown that my internship students develop a strong sense of self-belief and self-efficacy, a community of practice, effective communication, leadership responsibilities, and enthusiastic participation (passion for sport) as a result of their experiences. One of the most important things I have learned about being a facilitator of WIL is that personal conversations with individual students are key parts of the learning experience. For students to get the most out of the internship, I engage with each of them regularly and meaningfully throughout the time they are on placement. Each informal chats is an individual learning interaction that students enjoy and which advances their critical understanding of sports management and themselves.

> As I start my 25th year of tertiary teaching, I am excited about my new classes, and hope to bring the same energy and enthusiasm now as a professor, as I did as a young mathematics teacher when I started my career 35 years ago. While the subject content may be similar each year, the make-up of each new class brings different individual challenges and unique perspectives that make my role as a teacher, educator, facilitator and coach particularly rewarding and enjoyable. My leadership will encourage these new classes to aim high, add to the legacy, as I provide a catalyst for their personal and professional development.

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

An auto-ethnographic approach has provided a context for reflection through narration that challenged my preconceived ideas as to the effectiveness of my various teaching roles. The use of an emergent evolving auto-ethnography has contributed to a narrative with more meaningful and in-depth analysis of my teaching approaches. A major strength of the emergent auto-ethnography method was the liberating metacognitive style of writing, which contributed to a fuller and more complete analysis and understanding of my teaching practice. The following concluding extract from my teaching portfolio summarizes key aspects of my teaching practice.

> An holistic flexible experiential approach to teaching and supervising WIL has been presented, that advocates student centred course design and facilitates strategies to engage and enhance students' learning. Effective leadership and mentoring utilising coaching strategies and the development of intuitive good practice through peer feedback aim to improve the quality of tertiary teaching practice and result in better scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) of student learning outcomes, enhanced employability and a breadth and depth of T-graduate attributes (Gardner, 2017; Martin & Rees, 2018). My teaching is informed by innovative and research-led pedagogical approaches that set great expectations, facilitate critical reflection and leadership, and provide a catalyst for personal and professional change.

It is hoped that this self-reflective approach to critically evaluating practice will help other tertiary teachers developing their own evidence-based portfolios. The model presented (Figure 1) of a learning process involving an emergent, evolving continuum of initial, life-story biography, then evocative auto-ethnography and, finally, analytical auto-ethnography aims to enhance the learning process of the reflective teaching practitioner.

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