

‘A Parcel of Knowledge’: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Emotional Dimension of Teaching and Learning in Adult Education

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Abstract

The emotional dimension of teaching and learning from the perspective of the teacher and learner in adult education is considered in this paper by means of an autoethnographic story written as an approach to reflective practice. The genre of autoethnography allows for the personal and the autobiographical as a legitimate site for research into self and culture, in this case the culture of adult education. The space this approach opens up between writer and reader is considered to be a potential site of meaning making and reader responses are considered to this end.

Introduction

I was sitting at the top table at a conference, a gathering of adult learners on a counselling course. It was coming towards the end of the day and, relieved though I was that we, the conference organisers, had coped well and that we had nearly made it to the end of the day, I was tired and less than fully alive to the final proceedings, though I doubt if anyone would have known.

We asked for contributions from the floor and one man, I will call him John, asked for the roving microphone. He named himself, said where he was from and told us that he wanted to say that six weeks ago, before coming on to the course he would not have been able to ask for the microphone and speak in public. That is all John wanted to say that day, to demonstrate for himself and to his peers that his confidence had grown, that at least in part, he had found a voice. A colleague was more alert to the significance of this than I, and she talked to John afterwards. She learned that because of a speech difficulty he had stammered his way through life but that participating on the course had allowed him to face his fears and to push beyond the limits he had felt constrained by.

I think that, as adult educators, we are familiar in our work life with stories of learners growing in both skill and knowledge, as well as in their capacities to engage more fully with self and others through participation in adult education. But I am not sure that we have found ways of allowing such stories to be claimed as valid scholarly knowledge.

Autoethnography and writing as a mode of inquiry

So I decided to present an autobiographical story as the centrepiece of this paper to raise some issues around the complex process of the emotional process of adult learning. The story is an 'insider story' (Dirkx, 2006b), written out of my habit of using writing as an approach to reflective practice (Bolton, 2005, 2006) and as a mode of inquiry (Richardson, 1997; Richardson and St Pierre, 2005). It seeks to be what Speedy calls a 'parcel of knowledge-in-context' (2005, p.63) which embodies the experience of working as a facilitator of adult learning, and being in turn changed by that experience. At this level, it might achieve what Ellis and Bochner (2000, p.744) suggest that personal narratives can do;

[they] create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalisation, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question.

But it is not a straightforwardly autobiographical story. Stanley (1992, p.14), in the context of feminist approaches to research, coined the term 'the autobiographical I' to refer to the way in which there is no simplistic, innocent self at work in writing subjectively, the individual is always closely articulated with others. The genre of autoethnography is a growing resource that uses self-stories and life writing to 'display[s] multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.739). Such writing typically 'feature[s] concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterisation, and plot' (Ellis, 2004, p.xix). However, rather than seeing these genres 'as ways of retreating into personal, inner subjectivity,' they are an important resource for understanding culture that we can adopt 'as means to establish and stabilise intersubjectivity' (Roth, 2005, p.15).

I'm an adult educator, get me out of here¹

I couldn't justly call it badgering, but Bob² asked me over and over again until eventually I gave in. It was Christmas Eve when I succumbed to flattery, he said; I know you've said no before and I know you've offered the services of all of your colleagues, but I'm asking you. I want you to come and talk to us about adult education. We are all trained as teachers but now we are working with adults and we need some input from somewhere.

We were supping pints of Guinness in what passed for us as a 'local' in the town we had both married into. Work and stress just seemed so far away, so, despite my long-standing aversion to talking as 'expert' to any group, and despite all the fears and dreads that it brought up in me, I said I would.

Convivially we started planning together and a day-long 'Introduction to Facilitating Adult Learning' took shape; I would welcome the group, one colleague would run a group facilitation workshop, another colleague would talk to them about theoretical developments in the field of adult learning and I would finish the day talking about what I fancifully thought of as 'the emotional dimension of adult learning.'

My practice is to prepare my presentation, somewhat meticulously, well in advance of the nerves starting. This I did and I can see my notes now in my mind's eye, all headings and spidery writing. A manuscript of good practice in supporting adult learners. Well-written and well-referenced and, I now realise, fundamentally safe and boring. The day approached and with it my anxieties grew, but the security blanket of my precious paper helped hugely. That morning I met Bob and feigned relaxation and confidence. But as the group arrived the pretence strained me more and more. They arrived one by one, all big cars and briefcases, ties and power dressing. My sweater felt more drab than usual and my presentation notes lay limply crumpled in my backpack.

My imagination ran riot and I pictured these professionals in their various work contexts, all confidence and bluster, working with their groups, powerpoint

¹ The workshop described here is less a realist description of one event and more a conflation of a number of workshops.

² I am grateful to Bob for his permission to refer to our work together in this way and for his comments on a draft of the paper.

presentations running smooth as their dress. Experienced facilitators of growth, change and development in schools, colleges, working daily in the real world of hugely challenging issues with stressed and over worked educators.

I welcomed them and introduced the outline of the day and left them in the intimidatingly capable hands of my two colleagues. I wandered back to the office, the cold of the day seeping perniciously into my bones. I felt about seven years old. Young enough to feel terror, old enough to feel shame. My old pattern, well known to me but as powerful as ever, took over and I dreamed of running away.

Back in the relative safety of the office, I began to think about it. A question suggested itself to me: if I could run, cry off ill, or otherwise avoid the feelings, would I? Immediately the answer came: No, I would be depriving myself of an important opportunity for an adventure, for growing up just a little more. I thought of my children and how I might better help them face their fears by me facing mine.

So with no apparent way out, a second question, and it seemed to me to be a much more important one, surfaced in the panic: 'now I know what I would be missing if I backed out, but if I did back out, what would the *group* be missing?'

Shockingly fast the answer came from I know not where: 'vulnerability, the voice of vulnerability.' Something quickened inside me as the fear gave way to excitement. I knew immediately that I was on to something really important. There and then I found myself ceremoniously dumping my precious notes, all the words I had laboured over went head first into the grey institutional bin. I knew what I needed and headed in hope and haste to the library. The previous week I had been to a poetry reading by the poet Paula Meehan, and one poem she read that evening had stayed with me. I was lucky, the book was there and I re-read the poem to see if it is as powerful as I remembered;

*Literacy Class, South Inner City*³

One remembers welts festering on her palm
 She'd spelt 'sacrament' wrong. Seven years of age,
 preparing for Holy Communion. Another is calm
 describing the exact humiliation, forty years on, the rage

at wearing her knickers on her head one interminable day
 for the crime of wetting herself. Another swears she was punch drunk
 most her schooldays – clattered about the ears, made to say
I am stupid; my head's a sieve. I don't know how to think.

I don't deserve to live.

Late November, the dark
 chill of the room, Christmas looming and none of us well fixed.
 We bend each evening in scarves and coats to the work
 of mending what is broken in us. Without tricks,

without wiles, with no time to waste now, we plant
 words on these blank fields. It is an unmapped world
 and we are pioneering agronomists launched onto this strange planet,
 the sad flag of the home place newly furled.

(Meehan, 2000, p.51)

Having found the poem I now knew what to do. I had an objective correlative, something external to me to hold and contain my conviction that vulnerability is an inevitable part of the learning process in adult life; that it is a vital, in every sense of the word, part of change; that when it is your job to facilitate change there will inevitably be all sorts of emotions stirred up, not least in yourself; and that supporting yourself to face this distress is an essential resource in a facilitator's work. I knew now that what I really wanted to say to them did not reside in my prepared script, but in a space of dialogue between us – the poem a perfect catalyst for the conversation.

³ The poem appears in P. Meehan, *Dharmakaya* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000). I am very grateful to Paula Meehan and to Carcanet Press for kind permission to reproduce the poem in full here.

The time came to meet the group and the storm of anxiety had worked its way through my system. I met the group and I told them the story of the morning, of my projections about them, of my search for the poem and the significance it holds for me.

I read the poem and looked at the feelings it evokes. It is reasonable to assume, I told them, that all these feelings and more will be alive, implicitly or explicitly, in the learning process. I talked about adult education as a transitional space on the road to the creation of new identity and the way that this brings up the anxiety of and resistance to change. I asked them questions about the ethics of ignoring on the one hand, or provoking on the other, these life experiences in the learning space. I talked about what it demands of us as adult educators to know the geography of the emotional territory we invite people into when they work towards change and growth.

I had talked for some time and I felt anxious to focus on them and their own experiences now that they have a grasp of the basic ideas I was expressing. I was aware of myself as having enjoyed the time, feeling it went well. But the tension of handing it over to the silent group is never easy: will they engage or will they stay silent? Or worse still will they talk out of a polite deference to myself, a close friend of one of their number.

There is a silence after my question: ‘what does any of this bring up in you?’ I was aware of Michael⁴, a large jolly man, whom I know to be the elder of the group, the one who they each looked to for a steer on how to be. I could see him deep in thought. In one defining moment, he undid his tie, slumped in the chair but paradoxically took up more space in the room. ‘Sometimes...’ he said, and I make no apology for the language, for this is what he said, ‘sometimes I fucking hate this job.’

There was something of a collective sigh of relief, and they were off, talking about the difficulty of the work, the performance they have to engage in daily, the support they offer to people, the resistance that they encounter almost every day. We took these stories and drew them on the flipchart and questioned them, interrogating them from the point of view of relationship, transformation, participation and resistance.

⁴ I have changed a number of details, including name, in order to protect confidentiality.

Later that day I met them all. This time in a different ‘local’, mine as it happens. They were at pains to buy me drinks and we talked about where they came from and how they spend their time when they are not working. Michael talked about his passion for diving and I imagined him, divested of suit and tie, submerged in a different element. I weakly remembered the morning encounter and how I had felt about him, and I marvelled, as I so often do, at how comforting it is, how very inspiring it is, that we manage, despite the interferences of fate and ego, to keep surprising ourselves.

The emotional dimension of adult learning

It seems to me that processes of growth, change and development in adult education are more complex than I understood when I first began reading Freire (1970), Mezirow (1990) and Brookfield (1986, 1987) as key authors in the field I was operating in. My conviction grew over time that the emotional complexity of the process, particularly the vulnerability that lies at the heart of change, was not adequately theorised there and this sent me on a search for writers who offered such an understanding. I now want to offer a view drawn from these writers, not as purveyors of ‘ultimate truth’ typical of modern scholarship, but as important aspects of my own ‘positioning’ as a researcher (Roth, 2005, pp.13-14).

The story I present here was written out of an experience of vulnerability in professional life. Like John, at the start of the paper, there are personal and biographical aspects to my experience. But this vulnerability is also reflective of the emotional dynamics of teaching and learning that underpin the educative process in general (Nias, 1996; Noddings, 1996; Saltzberger-Wittenberg, et al., 1983), and the ‘intrinsically emotional business’ (Claxton, 1999, p.15) of working with adults in particular.

The story attempts to symbolise and work through my own moment-by-moment emotional process in facilitating a particular group. It details the assumptions I had about the group as they arrived and tracks the way in which I sifted this through so as to discern how best to cope with the situation for the group and for myself.

The story also draws attention to the relational aspect of the educative process and embodies the experience of both the complexity and the potential that lies there. The workshop participants knew well how to create a safe and support-

ive relationship with their groups, but they had no training as to how to work with the demands of any such relationship. Robertson (1996) writes of the need for such skills to be recognised and professionalised in adult education. He argues that adult educators are encouraged to promote transformative learning through facilitative relationships, but are not adequately prepared or supported to manage the dynamics of such relationships (Robertson, 1996, p.44).

My story attempts to embody the process of working in the powerful emotional context in which much adult learning occurs (Dirkx, 2001, 2006a) and points up the way in which the emotional dimension of working with adults operates at both conscious and unconscious levels of our selves. This is evident in the projections I had about the group before I encountered them, but also, in a parallel manner, in the resistance, apathy and anger that they themselves encounter regularly in their own developmental work. Such 'experience of emotion' in learning contexts, Dirkx (2006, p.22) suggests, are opportunities for 'establishing dialogue with the unconscious aspects of ourselves.' The story attempts to model a way to 'consider the symbolic meaning of emotion and affect' by attuning ourselves more carefully to our own processes of individuation and thereby heightening our awareness of that process in learners' lives (2006a, pp.18-21).

This act of symbolising professional experience in imaginative language places us in what Hunt and West (2006, p.164) call a 'border country' that straddles 'emotion and cognition, the social and psychological, self and other, education and therapy.' As the group of educators in the story seem to find out, this border country, when well managed and handled, can offer a space in which learners and educators alike can 'develop deeper and more critical understanding, and a stronger sense of who they are and want to be' (Hunt and West, 2006, p.174).

The story offers a pattern of experience whereby my own anxiety as educator is allowed to become a gateway to professional development and learning, for myself, if not necessarily for the group. West (2006, p.42) offers us a view of how anxiety can manifest itself in adult learning settings;

Anxiety, especially around threats to the self, can generate a whole range of defensive manoeuvres, often unconscious...in adult learning. These manoeuvres focus themselves around, for instance, our capacities to cope, or whether we are good enough, or are acceptable to, or even deserve to be accepted by, others.

The story tries to work to rehabilitate rather than disown this anxiety and points up the possibilities it holds for growth and change. Michael's experience of acknowledging unease with the stresses and strains of work offers possibilities of dialogue and learning that denial or stoicism do not. Coping with such anxiety requires the appreciation of the educative arena as a 'transitional space' where 'identity may be negotiated and risks taken in relation to potentially new identities' (West, 2006, p.42). West (2006, p.35) proposes a view of lifelong learning that honours both the social and the psychological, which can enable people 'to remain creative, rather than paranoid, in the face of constant change and uncertainty, and compose meaningful biographies in the process.'

There are important critiques of this position. Ecclestone (2004), for example, plots the rise of a therapeutic ethos in adult education whereby issues of self-esteem and vulnerability are located in individual psyches rather than in wider social and political forces. While recognising the cogency of the argument, my paper is an attempt to articulate a version of Adult Education as an intrinsically emotional activity that is potentially complex in its emotional resonance. It further suggests that adult educators need to be able to manage the emotional dynamics of teaching and learning, doing this most effectively by becoming attuned to their own emotional lives as educators, particularly concerning the impact of the educative relationship on them.

Writing inquiry as transitional space

Bond (2000) raises the question as to whether autoethnographies of this kind count as research. Goodall (2008, p.38) rehearses the usual objections that such self-narratives are narcissistic indulgences rather than real scholarship. However, he contrasts the genre of autoethnography as 'driven by lived experience and informed by scholarly resources' (2008, p.40). For Pelias (2004, p.11), autoethnographic stories 'seek connection' and are 'listening for [the reader's] answer' (2004, p.11). Autoethnographies are not just personal texts. Rather they 'move writers and readers into this space of dialogue, debate, and change' (Holman-Jones, 2005, p.764) and therefore need listeners and readers to fill them out.

Speedy refers to the spaces between writer and reader as 'imaginative sites in which to extend, provoke and create knowledge in new ways' (2008, p.33). These sites seem to come especially alive when there is dialogue between writer and

reader which creates what de Freitas (2008, p.474) calls a ‘moment of response, when the unanticipated appears, when the Other enters the work and leaves the traces of their...experiences.’

Readers’ responses

And so, following Sparkes (2007), I sought out some readers, all experienced adult educators, to whom I sent this paper inviting feedback⁵. My feelings in doing so were stark indeed: I felt exposed and vulnerable; whatever confidence I had in the paper seemed to dissolve like candyfloss. Monologue seemed much more comfortable at that point than dialogue (Goodall, 2000, p.11). I began to have huge questions about the paper, my motivations for writing it and to question the validity and value of autoethnographic writing.

The feedback when it came was both supportive and challenging. Anne, for example, talked of ‘resonating’ with the story, particularly as her reading of the paper bizarrely coincided with a very distressing session she had had with a group, after which she felt vulnerable ‘in a way that I have not felt for a very long time – maybe even never before.’ Mary and Paula both talked of feeling moved by reading the paper and of a shift in perspective on their work as educators. Mary talked of the paper as;

bringing up the issue of keeping oneself nurtured and alive to the creative process – vital, I think, to the transformative process. I know that when I neglect this aspect of my life usually due to overwork, I get stodgy in my thinking and my approach.

Mary pointed out that my lack of vitality in the story of the conference that opened the paper contrasted sharply with the sense of openness and responsiveness in the centrepiece story. I was reminded as I read this that I was indeed ‘stodgy’ and overworked as well as burdened by a family health issue at the time of the conference, and that I felt as if I was going through the motions of being present while feeling fundamentally empty and absent. Mary goes on to talk about how she maintains her aliveness;

⁵ I am indebted to Paula Meehan, Mary B. Ryan, Tony Walsh and Anne B. Ryan for their feedback, which has had a substantial effect on the paper. Extracts from their feedback are included in the paper. I am grateful also to Brid Connolly who read and offered feedback on the paper.

The story reminds me of the importance of going to films, plays, readings, galleries, gardens, hill-walks – activities I love and that nurture my soul. It is the poem [in the story] that grounds your discussion in the emotional realities and struggles of learning and that facilitated a real conversation.

Paula, the poet whose work was quoted in the story said;

I found the experience of reading it powerfully moving and felt I understood the act of witness that work in adult education involves in a different way afterwards. You know, even though much of my own work is in second chance education or non-traditional settings for learning, I rarely allow my own emotional states to have space for expression. Somewhere it has seeped into me, without it ever being explicit, that to be ‘professional’ I must hide some aspect of my humanity. I think your paper has focussed some of my anxiety around showing my own vulnerability as a teacher.

When I read Paula’s response I began to question myself: do I show my vulnerability as an adult educator? Probably not. Do I hide aspects of my own humanity? All the time. My search is for an alternative to hiding it or defending against it, or at the other extreme, dumping or spilling it. The story tries to embody the process of containing and working with anxiety, trusting that it can be a sign of being fully alive in an educative process, a strong and true part of it, a doorway to growth rather than a closed and sealed off experience.

Tony, Anne and Mary all commented on the way in which, in the particular draft they read, the academic reference seemed disconnected from the life affirming centrepiece story. This helped me to realise that, though I intended this paper to model a way of writing that engaged the personal and subjective as legitimate sites for research, I had cut and pasted from lecture notes and the like as a way of fulfilling the academic criteria of a paper. It seems to me now that this is an exact parallel to the ‘well written and well referenced’ paper that I had prepared in the story; that is, I protected myself from the exposure of the personal and the subjective by hiding behind academic reference and review. There is good reason for protecting oneself in this way. Anne hints at this when she talks about how reading the paper heightened her awareness of the vulnerability, not only of the educator, but also of the writer. She says that reading the paper;

made me very aware of the fact that when you write something in a book or article, it is there for ever and you may be judged on foot of it, by anyone who cares to offer an opinion...I am preparing a book for publication and having a great deal of trouble getting a satisfactory version of the final chapter together. I have suspected for a few weeks now that one of the reasons for this taking so long is that I am terrified of letting the book out into the public domain. I feel I will be judged harshly.

It seems to me now that one way of dealing with this fear is to defer to the voices of the authoritative others that reside in academic textbooks rather than speaking in one's own voice. Indeed, Anne's response prompted me to reflect on the double edged sword of finding a voice, as John did at the conference: though it is liberating, it is also scary, in that this new public self may, indeed, be judged harshly.

The experience of receiving much of this feedback from my colleagues was both personally challenging and hugely developmental. It was itself a mixed emotional dynamic of being at once open and defensive, feeling both affirmed and 'criticised'; a process all the while characterised by a sense that, though I was already somewhat dimly aware of many of the things that were pointed out to me, I depended on the voice of the other to mirror them back to me.

On reviewing and being reviewed

I also received feedback from the process of peer review that followed submitting the paper for publication. Feedback came from the anonymous external reviewer and it affirmed much in the paper. It pointed out some contextual and theoretical looseness (which I then changed), but also, once again, it challenged me in interesting ways. The reviewer questioned the fact that Michael in the story, and indeed Bob, my friend, had not been consulted as part of the reader/writer dialogue. I had considered doing this but I was aware that I had no relationship with Michael beyond the day we spent together and that Bob, my friend, was, at that time struggling with very difficult feedback from his own thesis supervisor and I felt I owed it to him to respect his sensitivities. But, I realised when it came to being myself challenged as to why I did not consult him, that another issue lay lurking behind my concern.

I had remembered him saying out of the corner of his mouth, on the day of the session described in the story, that the space I had created with the group was good. I believed him and felt much warmth and appreciation from the group on the night later in the pub. But, I realised when I did send the paper to Bob for his comment that I felt quite vulnerable: what if he remembered the day differently to me; what if he thought it was narcissistic to write about it in the way I have done; what if I just got it plain wrong?

So I sent the paper to Bob who made a number of comments. He said;

One of the recommendations on the day was that we all need a ‘supervision’ type of support. All agreed that this was absolutely necessary but the issue was never again mentioned by anyone. I knew exactly what you were talking about as I had been in supervision in a previous job. None of the others in the group had been in a professional supervision group before – I think they saw it as counselling. Why was it never again mentioned by the group, I ask myself.

In part this does support the sense that indeed I had got it plain wrong: it would seem the day had little lasting effect on the group members. But a second comment he made clarified something for me: he asked me ‘who is the learner in this paper – the group or you or both?’ Immediately I realised that the lasting learning from the incident is my own. Autoethnography is here used as a vehicle for professional development, as an ‘educative space for bringing the inquirer’s subjectivity into the foreground, enabling it to be examined critically and reflectively, and developed further via creative and contemplative thinking’ (Pereira, Setelmaier and Taylor, 2005, p.51).

Over to you⁶

So, in writing this paper I am not making claims for anyone else’s learning – that would be a different paper. But there is another claim made here, and that is the claim that writing and reading also constitute spaces for dialogue and learning, and indeed, for transformation (Goodall, 2000, p.40). It suggests that the capacity to encounter the other in writing and reading is a viable path to transformative learning (Pereira, Setelmaier and Taylor, 2005).

⁶ Readers’ responses are invited and welcomed and can be sent to me at david.mccormack@nuim.ie

So, having read the story and some of the methodological and theoretical considerations that surround it, what are you left with? Did the story invite you into a space of reflection yourself? Did it help you to think about your own experience of working with adult learners, particularly the emotional dimension of facilitating and participating in adult learning? Does it help you to tune in to stories you might tell that help you and others to reflect on your work with adult learners, or on your own experience as an adult in a constant learning process? Do you have a sense that these stories might live as research? If so, then you have allowed yourself to enter the transitional space between writer and reader that holds out possibilities for meaning making and consciousness raising. And so to answer the question that Bond (2000) posed about autoethnography 'but is it research?' I offer a comment from Paula, one of the readers of the paper who says that she was struck;

by how powerful the non-institutionalised approach to the presentation of research can be. A more aboriginal way of being seems the way forward – that we transmit knowledge and understanding through the crafty, coded, and far reaching vehicle that is story.

A more eloquent argument for autoethnography I can scarcely imagine.

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