ISSN: 1712-851X

Main Article:

Becoming University Scholars: Inside Professional Autoethnographies

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Abstract

This article shows part of the results of a research project: The Impact of Social Change in Higher Education Staff Professional Life and Work (Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, SEJ2006-01876). The main aim of this project was to explore and understand how scholars establish a dialogue, resist, adapt themselves or adopt changes, in the process of constructing their professional identities. As the members of the research team were scholars ourselves, teaching and carrying out research in Spanish universities, we started this research by writing our own autoethnographies. As a result, we developed nine autoethnographies which give a complex and in-depth account of senior and junior scholars' journeys into their process of constructing their professional identity and working lives in a rapidly changing world. This article starts by giving a context to the research project and arguing the need for conducting autoethnographies. It goes on to discuss the process itself of writing

autoethnographies in the context of a given research project. We then refer to the topics which have a bearing on how we have learnt to become scholars: our experience as university students, the beginning of the academic career, relationships with others, and the consequences of the mark of gender. We conclude with the lessons learnt around the dilemmas on writing autoethnographies.

1. Introduction: The Research Context

Over the last 40 years, the university has undergone diverse restructurings and reforms. In the case of Spain this process started in 1970 with the General Law of Education and had two crucial re-framing moments with the Constitutional Law of University Reform in 1983, and the Law of University Organisation of 2001, which was amended in 2007. The development of these laws, in time with the social, political, economic, cultural, and technological changes in society have gradually redefined both the mission of the university and the functions and responsibilities of the teaching and research staff.

Like most social organisations, higher education institutions are undergoing fundamental structural changes which are deeply affecting scholars' identity and working conditions. These transformations are related, among other aspects, to:

(a) new knowledge production, access, dissemination and legitimisation systems of postmodern societies and the emergence of new fields of knowledge (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzmann, Scott, & Trow, 1994; Lyotard, 1984),

(b) the digitalisation of information which displaces the attention from values and ideas to the means and techniques of obtaining effective results (Marshall, 1999), and

(c) the mix of new economic perspectives with new information and communication technologies (ICT) which is fostering new organisational formats for higher education (Hanna & Associates, 2000), putting a lot of pressure on these institutions (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Metcalfe, 2006) and people working in them--especially scholars.

In this context, those of us who teach and undertake research in the university are immersed in one of the deepest transformations experienced by this institution. Additionally, in Europe, along with these factors underlying changing processes, we should add the political and economic circumstances which have led to the creation of what is called the European Space for Higher Education. This change has not appeared out of the blue, but culminates a

process of adjustments and reforms in educational policies that have deeply affected the higher education field. Social, political, cultural, economic, and technological changes worldwide have turned education and training, and the meaning and forms of knowledge, into the Gordian knot of a specific conception of progress. In this context, the experiences and perceptions of the university teaching and research staff regarding the changes experienced in the university--in their functions, their professional life, their working conditions, and the very meaning of this change--transcend the adjustments and legislative reforms. Further, they shape an emerging field of study that can help us understand the diverse situations that the university is currently experiencing within the internationalisation process of the higher educational model currently being proposed.

This situation, that some authors identified as early as the 1970s as a crisis of the university (Bourricaud,1971), has led to countless studies and publications about the challenges and transformations that the university is facing (Barnett, 2000; Currie, DeAngelis, De Boer, Huisman, & Lacotte, 2003; Ibarra, 2002), the impact of ICT on higher education (Hanna & Associates, 2000; Katz, 2008; Metcalfe, 2006), the changes in the role and teaching practice of university teachers (Hanna & Associates, 2000), and the evolution of academic life and its implications for those who teach and undertake research in the university (Knight, 2002; Pedró, 2004).

A majority of these studies have been undertaken from a macro and structural perspective in which scholars, at the very best, have their views compiled through questionnaires. However, it is difficult to find studies where the voices of those deeply involved in the institutional daily activities can be heard. This is the reason behind our research aimed at capturing how university teachers and researchers from different fields of knowledge and institutional positions have experienced change over time. This experience has been contrasted with other sources of information about recent changes and in a specific way with those induced by national and European higher education policies. In this sense, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is of great interest, since it enables us to find the intellectual tools for connecting the expectations of the leading players (university teachers and researchers) with the orientations and the strategies they use to fight/adapt to the changes in their institutional context. From this point of view, a professional identity may be considered as a certain type of "habitus," a notion that led us to base our study on a "theory of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990) with the central concepts of *position*, *disposition*, *positioning*, *field*, and *habit*. This is the rationale underpinning the research project this paper builds on: The Impact of Social Change on Higher Education Staff, Professional Life and Work (project Web site at the Centre for the Study of Change in Culture and Education, CECACE [in Spanish]), the main aim of which was to explore and understand through life histories how scholars establish a dialogue, resist, adapt themselves to or adopt changes, and construct their professional identities.

In this context, being university teachers and researchers ourselves, we decided, as an act of epistemological and methodological coherence, to start the study by writing our professional autoethnographies (Sparkes, 2002). We have chosen this methodological approach because we considered autoethnography as one person's life experiences placed in a broader cultural and social context, in this case related to university changes. As a

consequence, as Brockmeier points out (2000), adopting an autoethnographic perspective means interpreting and reconstructing significant experiences, and placing them in relation to the social and cultural discourses of our time. In this vein, we consider that "autoethnography is research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) and also as Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 733) defined this research approach as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that plays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."

In a complementary direction Reed-Danahay (1997) asserts that autoethnography is "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (p. 9, cited in Humphrey, 2005, p. 841) and that, "personal, autobiographical modes of writing are vital for knowledge production in the social sciences" (ibid., p. 852). Under these considerations, the professional autoethnography involves the writing-up of an account that includes all the actions and events related to our academic career just as each of us experienced them, and locating them in specific coordinates of time and space. From here comes the importance of writing our autoethnographies in the first stage of the research with two main aims. Being scholars ourselves, the former related to the need to show our position in front of the phenomenon studied: how scholars establish a dialogue, resist, adapt themselves to or adopt changes in the process of constructing their professional identities. The latter required us to adjust our listening to our collaborators in the process of undertaking their professional life histories, without forgetting that the "autoethnography portrays meaning through dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot claiming the conventions of literary writing" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 449).

From an autoethnographic perspective, researching into university teaching and research staff means researching into ourselves as members of the same group (Roth, 2005). From here came the need to write our autoethnographies, in order to identify key moments in the professional life of each member of the research team and place them in context. In this process, the diversity of the research group constituted a particularly significant element. The team that undertook this study was made up of people who began their work at the university in the 1980s, so that their academic careers were totally developed; others joined in the 1990s and were permanently employed; and others had temporary contracts or pre-doctoral scholarships. These different professional careers and the distinct positions and occupational relationships that are established with the institution, made up the rich range of possibilities offered by researching oneself within the group and with the group.

2. The Writing of the Autoethnographies

On starting the construction process of the professional autoethnographies the nine members of the research team spent several meetings forming a consensus and defining how to undertake this task. We were clear that each one of us should individually write and share with the group an "autoprofessional" narrative focused on the changes in our academic career. Thus, prior to the process of writing it was necessary for us to place a common framework of reference around these three main topics. What were the main characteristics of an autoethnographic text? How would it be differentiated, for example,

from an autobiography, a biographical essay, or a life history? Was each of us clear about these concepts and practices?

Establishing (or otherwise) shared thematic frameworks and leitmotifs also constitute an important question. We could, for example, define key themes around which to structure the autoethnographies. But how could we decide--and under which criteria--what was relevant to include in each of our texts? It meant, of course, writing a professional account; therefore, the interest and the emphasis of the autoethnographies were in a certain way delimited. What was interesting to share was our careers as both teachers and researchers, our history connected to the university and linked to significant moments and contexts of change. All in all, the limits of this dimension were not always clearly surmised. Should we include our experience as students? When did our relationship with the university begin? As students? As scholarship-holders? What about the previous experiences that structured our choice for the career of university teacher? Did it make sense to think about them? What place would they have in the text?

All these and other questions raised seemed relevant because according to Ellingson and Ellis, "autoethnography becomes a space in which an individual's passion can bridge individual and collective experience to enable richness of representation, complexity of understanding, and inspiration for activism" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 448).

Additionally, it was important not to lose sight of the fact that the notion of change was fundamental in the research. Such a consideration clearly meant that we should choose narrative formats, contents, and strategies that would enable us to take account of this dimension in our professional autoethnographies. For instance, it meant paying attention to moments of personal and professional transits such as learning processes, crises, migrations, beginnings and ruptures, new contexts and relations, and so forth. On the same lines, it was important to compare our autoethnographic narrative with social changes of a more general order (political, economic, regarding knowledge, technologies, etc.), asking ourselves how they had affected our identity as teachers and researchers.

Despite these shared reference aspects, each of us still had total liberty in the construction of our autoethnography. No narrative styles or way of articulating the content of the stories was established or agreed on. This was connected to our desire for the writing of the autoethnographies to be an experimental process--in the sense that it would favour creativity, and would enable us to explore and look deeper into the experiences of professional life linked to change, with different meanings and narrative styles. Moreover, in this process we thought about learning from each other, and mainly, from the different approaches and visions that each person put into play in their stories. We will now look into how these dilemmas were concretised in the decision made by each of us about how to start our autoethnographic accounts.

2.1. How Should We Start a Professional Autoethnography?

Autoethnographic accounts need a beginning that marks the meaning of what comes next. In our case, the diversity of narrative styles and ways of articulating the contents are

reflected in the very form of starting the stories. Some, like Virginia Ferrer, begin with brief personal and professional curriculum vitae in which they display a certain nostalgia for an earlier professional stage:

> I am 45 years old, have two children, am divorced, and now have a new stable partner. I am currently a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Didactics and Educational Organisation of the Faculty of Teacher Training of the UB, obtaining tenure in 1997. Earlier, I was an Assistant Teacher from 1991, when I asked for unpaid leave as secondary school teacher. From 1987 to 1991, I taught in several secondary schools in Catalonia. I loved the experience with adolescents. I still miss them a lot. I was pedagogic coordinator when the LOGSE reform began, Head of the Department of Philosophy, curricular experimenter with the project by Lipman, "Philosophy for children." (Ferrer, 2008, translated from Spanish)

Others, like Fernando Hernández, start from a metaphor that represents the meaning of their professional life, while explaining how they are going to articulate their autoethnographic narrative:

> My doctoral thesis (Hernández, 1985) begins with the first verse of the famous poem by Frost, *The Road Not Taken*. It has always been a referent for me. For this reason, the decisions in my relationship with the university, the decisions that mark changes, are the central theme of this autoethnography, organised from scenes that point to or open the door towards transits between my experience, cultural questions, and social dynamics. (Hernández, 2008, translated from Spanish)

Some, like Aída Sanchez de Serdio, directly begin from a familiar experience that locates the starting point in her academic career:

> At my father's academy we had plaster hands and feet, as well as the head of Seneca and a Venus of Milo. There were very natural looking artificial flowers that you could find in the market. Plastic fruit for those that were not quick enough painting still lifes of fresh fruit, an incredible variety of jugs and containers, as well as fabrics of all textures and colours. The spatial and volumetric structure of the arrangements of objects was established on the white sheets by means of minimum charcoal marks. (Aída Sánchez de Serdio, personal communication, June 2008, translated from Spanish)

Montserrat Rifà recognises the influence of an author on her decision to articulate her autoethnography around photos that have accompanied her in the different offices in which she has worked:

> The idea of initiating the autoethnographic narrative with a photo of my office in the university, came from reading a text by Price-Spratlen (2000) in which, as well as basing a research project theoretically and methodologically based

on the political analysis of visual culture in the university spaces, he also produced an autoethnography of his workplace. (Rifà, 2008, translated from Spanish)

Several narratives start from the university student stage. Some, like Sandra Martinez, are aware of the difficulty of the task and use previous works--like the one presented at the end of doctoral studies:

Thinking and reflecting about the changes that have happened to me professionally and personally in the university since I entered it as a student has not been an easy task by any means. To do it, I have gone back to the essay I wrote to justify my dissertation paper. And now, I have rewritten, deconstructed and reconstructed what I wrote constantly along the following lines. (Martínez, 2008, translated from Spanish)

This narrative diversity, that denotes multiplicity of professional, biographical, and political positionalities, constitutes one of the most genuine and rich contributions of this type of research in which the subjects themselves are the ones who seek the way to best express the meaning of their professional experiences in order to understand better their changes throughout their career.

3. Issues Arising From the Collaborative Reading of Autoethnographies

The nine autoethnographies were separately published (see the project Web site at CECACE [in Spanish]). The written texts were used as the base of a debate among the research team members with a twofold purpose. Firstly, to explore the potential and constraints of autoethnography as a methodological strategy to situate the lived experience accounts both socially and culturally. We will refer to this dimension in the last section of this article. Secondly, to better understand how change at the university was affecting our personal and professional identities. For this article, the four authors--with the consent of the rest of the members--have selected the following topics which have a bearing on how we have learnt to become scholars: our experience as university students, the beginning of the academic career, relationships with others, and the consequences of the mark of gender.

Identifying the issues emerging from a set of autobiographies is a practice that enables the individual experience to become something shared and social. This practice allowed us to establish bridges, nexuses, and differences, making the individual autoethnographies transform into a convergence of narratives related to the social and cultural forces having an effect on our ways of becoming university teachers and researchers. The analysis of the emerging issues and topics is what Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul (1997, p. 206) describe as "sorting and lifting" of data. It leads towards an uncovering of the nature of the lived experience of the autoethnographers/researchers.

3.1. The Beginning of the Story: Being University Students

The experience received during the stage of being university students was highly valued and marked the beginning of the type of teachers and researchers that we wanted to become

and, more importantly, the type with which we did not want to identify. The stories are about that time in which one learnt to be a teacher, balancing between the awareness of the privilege that being able to accede to this type of training meant in a country such as Brazil (for Amalia Creus), the toughness of the situation of the university in a country--Chile-- which was in the grip of a dictator (for Patricia Hermosilla), and the possibility of another way of relating and acceding to knowledge that the experience of the university could provide (for Juana M. Sancho).

> Getting into public university in Brazil is a privilege reserved for the few. To achieve it, you have to pass through a competitive selection process in which thousands of young people try to get through every year, and few make it. The ones that do generally come from families in a comfortable social position, those who have had a better basic education and better conditions to undertake it. . . . The most striking memory I have of this time is the feeling of wanting to and being able to do everything. (Creus, 2008, translated from Spanish)

> The context in which I went to university, and to this university, "la chile" (Chile), may help identify my training that I can describe generally as a time and space in which there was no dialogue, but rather a search for silencing, of concealment perhaps, which did not help in "comprehension," in this curious and interesting dialectical relationship that occurs between the past, present, and future of men and women (although it is not recognised). (Hermosilla, 2008, translated from Spanish)

> To this institution (the university), I was attracted as a child. I thought it was the fifth essence of knowledge. Without being aware, I had a very platonic idea about it and without telling myself explicitly I thought that knowledge, beauty, and virtue formed an almost magical triangle. . . . I glimpsed inklings of knowledge, beauty and virtue that helped me keep up my desire to learn; I also glimpsed and experienced ignorance (not as awareness of not knowing and wanting to know, but rather as the "total" certainty of knowing, which is a way of not knowing) and bloody-mindedness. (Sancho, 2008, translated from Spanish)

These experiences point out social and historical contexts that produce relationships and mark expectations and disappointments. They also place us in ways of representing the first academic knowledge and positionalities that informed our initial meaning of being in the university.

3.2. The First Steps in the University Career

Entrance into the university as teachers or scholarship holders and the first experiences of research are permeated, in all the cases, by a series of social forces: the working conditions made possible by the university legislation of each historical period, the economic and social situation, and institutional cultures reflected in the decisions made, and power relationships in the university. The role of this fabric of relationships is reflected by Patricia

Hermosilla in her narrative about her experience in Chile, in 1994, when at the end of a long period of dictatorship, the university opened a college dedicated to teacher training, the Centre of Pedagogic Studies, where she would begin her career as a teacher and researcher.

> We speak of a college that "restarts" its task in formally training teachers "on the basis of a historical experience." A history that was not recovered either through people or physical space, or of its structure and training plans, in general with nothing, because the Pedagogic Institute had disappeared and those that took on the task were other teachers, in a distinct infrastructure, with perspectives that were not focused on recovering that experience, but rather on elaborating a new experience. (Hermosilla, 2008, translated from Spanish)

On the role of the political and social context, Fernando Hernández recounts the moment of expansion of the Spanish university, in which he, as well as many other young scholars, gained a tenured post as part of the democratising political project of the university that, since 1982, the socialist government had promoted:

> The year after presenting the thesis, the opportunity arose to opt for a full-time post (in 1986). That was when the doctoral programmes began in the Fine Arts Faculty, the University of Barcelona was growing with the demographic boom and the socialist democratisation, and a new stable teaching staff was required. (Hernández, 2008, translated from Spanish)

These and other testimonies clearly show that learning to be a teacher is related to what occurs in the social, historical and political context in which not only the university moves but also the social discourses that give shape and meaning to the autoethnographies.

3.3. Encounters and Mix-Ups with Colleagues and Institutions

In all the autoethnographies we find references to the encounters and mix-ups with colleagues and institutions, which have been the source of important learning processes, as well as a reason for personal and professional growth and stagnation. Just as Aída Sánchez de Serdio points out, from her experience:

> The posts are important but so are the people who occupy them or, more specifically, the relationships that exist between these people. This is even more important in the office because there is not a formal chain of command but there are relationships of power, recognition, and de-recognition. The stories of the people around me interlaced long before my arrival. (Aída Sánchez de Serdio, personal communication, June 2008, translated from Spanish)

On this same question, but from another perspective, Juana M. Sancho refers to a specific experience that led her to recognise the role that the people in the maintenance or reproduction of institutional structures have: people who, although they can help us grow

and provide us with support, can also place obstacles in the way of the goals and aspirations that each person pursues.

> A particularly decisive and disappointing moment for me was when the head of department refused to give the go-ahead to a request for a support technician for the research. Not having this endorsement meant not being able to take part in the official tender and losing an important human resource that would have contributed to the development of the group's research. I could not understand that an institution that asked you to look for resources denied them when you asked for them. (Sancho, 2008, translated from Spanish)

These and other similar remarks reflect that one learns to be an academic in a scheme of daily relationships, which nearly always mirror forms of conflict or cooperation. In this context one learns to negotiate, resist, and accept, to thus produce a series of professional experiences of which each of us take part.

3.4. The Mark of Gender

Since the majority of the members of the research team are women, in a large number of autoethnographies the consequences of the mark of gender are visible as an aspect that shapes learning to be an academic. Aída Sánchez de Serdio places her awareness on this issue at the beginning of her professional career, before the relations of superiority or hostility that some of her older colleagues made her feel, as a result of her condition of being a young female scholar:

> In the departmental committees and in the informal meetings with those who are now my colleagues, I realised the consideration that a young, woman researcher and teaching scholarship holder deserves. (Aída Sánchez de Serdio, personal communication, June 2008, translated from Spanish)

Alternatively, the mark of gender is visible in the condemnation that Virginia Ferrer makes, on referring to the difficulty of reconciling private with professional life in a university that until quite recently did not have defined equal opportunity policies.

> There are no work-family conciliation measures or support for the woman-mother teacher/researcher, there are no equal opportunity policies in the university. (Ferrer, 2008, translated from Spanish)

The mark of gender is also visible in the strategy that Alejandra Montané describes to resist the impositions and tolls that the forms of exercising masculine power in the university confronted her with.

> I learnt to move around the nooks and corners of power in general and masculine power in particular. (Montané, 2008, translated from Spanish)

These reflections and others related to decisions and tensions of the self in this learning process and how social, cultural, and institutional changes have scaffolded our academic

identities, have enabled us to understand better: (a) how we have learnt to be the kind of scholars we are and (b) what the role is of the historical context, the power relationships, and the gender issues in the construction of our personal and professional identities.

4. Conclusions: Dilemmas on Writing Autoethnographies

The process of writing professional autoethnographies has not been as simple as we had initially imagined. It seemed that having committed ourselves to a research project of this type, of not having to negotiate the collaboration of external people, of being able to focus the writing on those aspects of professional life relating to the changes experienced and expressed by each one of us, would result in an easy execution of this task (Gannon, 2006). However, the discussions provoked in the group work sessions, the emerging issues, the questions set and the doubts that arose were many and of a great conceptual and methodological richness. From this entire process we underline some of the central points of discussion that the group signalled as the most representative.

The process of writing. How to represent oneself in an autoethnography? In our case, the fact of it being a professional autoethnography focused on the changes we considered most significant already gave us a focus. But it would be ourselves who decided what we considered as change and in what sense we had been affected. This exercise required a great deal of reflexivity and re-composition of our own professional careers. On the other hand, we had to decide how to make the experience we had had explicit, choosing a style for our narrative, with central themes, a sense of continuity, some ties and possible outcomes. In all narratives there is a temporal dimension that often begins with us as university students and ends in the present-future. Finally, each text contains a singular story both in the facts that make up their plot and for the narrative style used that is placed in a context that, although shared, is not always reflected in the same way.

The role of the other in the autoethnographic account. The narrative construction of oneself and the fact of speaking from this standpoint necessarily imply the relationship with others. In all the events and experiences, others have a role that we necessarily interpret, just as we do with the meaning of our career. The events may be *objective*, when something happened on that particular day at that time in the presence of so many people. But the narration of these events, our position and interpretation are personal and often differs from the positions and interpretations of others. Moreover, on remembering, reconstructing, and turning these episodes into words or images, not only have we now applied a selective examination but we have also shown to the others involved an undesired (or otherwise) examination of themselves: an examination that the other people--directly or indirectly involved--may find just or unjust, kind or rude, evocative or disturbing.

Reconstructing the narrative from the here and now. As we have mentioned above, we understood the autoethnography not as a lineal succession of events, but as the reconstruction of the experience lived and expressed in relation to the changes throughout our professional lives. What matters here is not so much what happened, the circumstances around it, and the context that gave rise to it, but rather what we experienced, what it meant for us and how we positioned ourselves and interpreted it then and now. In fact, the

autoethnography is not neutral but selects specific events and ignores others, and those it selects are portrayed under a specific and, of course, subjective light. It means that the experiences as narrated by the participants might not have been understood by them in the same way at the time the events occurred.

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