Translational research as an integral part of work–based learning

Autoethnography in Practice Based Research

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Introduction

Practice-based research, as the name suggests, involves the practitioner exploring and developing his or her practice. It has a long tradition in the fine arts (Candy, 2006); however, in other forms of practice, its development has been discipline-specific and merely implicit. The advent of the professional doctorate and increasing recognition of the value of practice (Lester 2012; Lester & Costley 2004) have increased general interest in practice-based research – and, with that, greater recognition of the need for a coordinated and focused investigative approach that ensures both rigour and consistency (Costley & Fulton 2018). However, the relationship with practice and research is not straightforward; further, there are various types of knowledge or epistemologies that can be derived from practice. This paper will consider auto ethnography as a methodological approach for practice research. Ethnography will be considered which will lead to an outline of autoethnography. The epistemological stance of the auto ethnographer will be considered and the paper will conclude by considering the insider position of the research and the associated ethical issues that can arise from taking this position.

Practice research is research generated through work-based activities; Bernstien et al (1990) describes this type of knowledge as 'everyday' or 'horizontal'. Scott et al. (2004) propose several types of knowledge: 'disciplinary', 'technical-rational'; 'transdisciplinary', or 'dispositional and critical'. Lester and Costley (2004) place practice research in the transdisciplinary or dispositional category; as such, it is centrally concerned with the individual and his or her practice. Frayling (1993), articulates the approaches which can be taken when considering the practice based research and he identifies three ways in which research can relate to practice: research *about* practice, research *into* practice and research *through* practice. While there are exceptions to this, a common feature of practice research an acknowledgement of the presence of the researcher. Autoethnography can be an appropriate approach to explore the development of practice and particularly in research through practice.

Ethnography

Ethnography has a long tradition and is a recognised methodological approach in sociological and anthropological studies. The earlier ethnographers studied what, for them, were unfamiliar cultures. For example, Malinowski (1922) carried out ethnographic studies in areas such as New Guinea, Mexico, and Australian aborigines. In so doing, he laid down many of the premises of ethnography as a research approach. The basic principle is making intelligible, and demonstrating a logic and reasoning behind, what seemingly are strange and incomprehensible behaviours. Participant observation emerged as a research method in which the researcher typically lived and worked with the people he or she was studying – and, through this immersion, gained a detailed understanding. More recently, another ethnographer, Clifford Geertz (1973) wrote of 'rich description', by which he meant that, through a detailed recounting of culture and practices, the ethnographer could make intelligible and show logic and rationality for culturally-specific actions and practices.

Whilst the tradition of studying cultures disparate from that of the researcher, there are also many ethnographies which explore an area of the researchers own culture, which may or may not be familiar to the researcher. Examples of this, are the studies of Mathew Desmond (2012), who examined the

vulnerable housing market in Detroit and its pattern of evictions. Alice Goffman's controversial study (2015), which examined the experiences of young black men in an era of increased police surveillance and an associated increase in custodial sentences, explored strategies of avoiding arrest and court appearance and, further, the ways in which women assisted their men in avoiding arrest. Both these researchers followed the traditional ethnographic approach and provided rich description, enabling us to see the world through the eyes of those they studied.

In ethnography, the presence of the researcher is acknowledged and discussed; in many ethnographic studies, the researcher is going into an unfamiliar culture and is participating in what can be described as a strange and different reality. While their presence is typically discussed and acknowledged, there is the sense of approaching the topic as a 'fly on the wall'. It is as if there is a tangible reality which, through thick description, the researcher is discovering and bringing to life. In more recent studies there is a tendency for the researcher to acknowledge that, by being present, he or she can do more than merely influence: indeed, the researcher can actually *shape* the reality being studied. Stated differently, his or her presence can have a direct effect on that community/culture. What the researcher does, thinks, and feel is of importance; rather than provide a rich description of others, they focus on their own experience and how their own meanings therefrom derive are shaped.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is becoming an increasingly popular methodological approach; it is one in which both the process and product can illuminate and develop practice. It is not without its pitfalls and can easily degenerate into an interesting but merely descriptive account. In the past 25 years or so, autoethnography has emerged as a methodology in which the position of the researcher is central and his or her experience is central to the study. It has been defined by Ellis and Brockner (2000) as:

an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth ethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focussing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (739).

McIlween (2008) states that the core feature of autoethnography ' *entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon*' (p. 3). Thus, it involves not just writing about oneself, it is about being critical about personal experiences in the development of the research being undertaken or about experiences of the topic being investigated. The main idea is that the researcher writes of their experience and that this is central to the research study. In so doing, the researcher describes their experience of culture; this is often one that is not part of mainstream society, for example, the experience of growing up gay (McLaurin, 2003).

In the past 30 years or so, the tradition of autoethnography has emerged in which the researcher is more certainly the insider and the central focus is on their experience of a group or subculture. Sometimes the membership is by virtue of birth, alternatively, it may be a profession or group where membership is dictated by circumstances such as illness or other situations or, alternatively, the experience of belonging to a profession with its particular culture. The epistemological position is that of constructivism, whereby the researcher is very much part of the situation. Rather than reporting on the alien world, they are an active part of it (and thus totally immersed, and co-creating) within that situation. They are able to capture this sense of total involvement; styles from other genres are often employed and less conventional approaches are also used to present the data such as styles of writing akin to literature or in the form of visual art. An example of this is Carolyn Ellis' (2004) work '*The autoethnographic I*'.

Anderson (2006) uses the term 'evocative autoethnography' to capture the process; by this he means the style of writing aims to produce feelings or empathy in on the part of the reader. The style alone does not make the work autoethnographic; it is rather a focus on the experience of the researcher and the implicit theoretical basis of the work. Autoethnography is not strictly biographical, nor is it a journalistic account. For example, the Norwegian journalist who wrote the *Bookseller of Kabul* presented an interesting and insightful account of her experiences living with an Afghan family (Seierstad, 2002). The theoretical position neither is explicitly or implicitly evident; while this book is of interest, illuminating the experience of others, it does not have the theoretical insight needed to make it a research study.

Autoethnography is very attractive for the practice researcher, as it incorporates the reflection which is integral to practice research but it is not without its pitfalls. A degree of criticality is required; it is concerned with the experience of an individual with a culture or cultural setting. Anderson (2006) goes onto consider what he calls analytical autoethnography as opposed to evocative autoethnography; in doing so, he lists five criteria: complete membership; a reflective and analytic account of the research; the researcher's presence evident in the study; the account of the research going beyond the self, and the existing commitment to a theoretical analysis. Practice research can involve the detailed consideration of practice, covering several years, or it can be focused a practical activity or project. Anderson's criteria can capture the focus and process of practice; as such, Anderson's typology is a useful tool for this process. Through this analysis, there can be an illumination of much of what is implicit in practice, such as tacit knowledge, as well as the inconsistencies and inequalities which may be inherent in practice.

Epistemology

In research, the epistemological position of the researcher determines the focus and direction of the investigation. It also determines whether the reality being studied is seen as something which exists in a priori manner **or** as a social construction. Saunders et al. (2003) argued that there are layers of a

research study, with the outer layer representing the philosophical assumptions on which the study is based. Further, the methodology, methods, and type of data collected are dictated to by the philosophical stance of the researcher. Ethnographic studies can vary in their approaches. At one end of the continuum, we have the (seemingly) dispassionate ethnographer studying an alien culture; Malinowski (1922), for example, was writing in this tradition. On the other end of the scale, we have the involved and immersed autoethnographer who is focused on his or her experience and is constructing an account that may well differ from others' experiences and subsequent accounts of the phenomena.

Ontologically, in practice-based research, autoethnographic accounts are constructionist; they are a construction of the researchers' experiences, the theory drawn upon to make sense of the experiences and which shapes the account is part of the construction. It is not a realist ontology and is at the opposite end of the continuum from constructionism. Epistemology, the knowledge that is generated and valued should follow the ontological position. Stanley Deetz (1996) considered the types of knowledge this can be generated through practice-based research; his ontology provides a useful framework.

The scientific or evidenced based approach in which the key issue is the application of research-based evidence to practice, this is in the positivist tradition in which the researcher's position minimises bias, clearly this is not the type of knowledge which could be generated by ethnography or autoethnographic studies. However there is recently a large body of literature around the translation of research findings into practice both from health (Fontanaroosa & DeAngelis, 2002); education (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Malinovskyte, Mothe, & Rüling 2016). There is a growing body of work considering information technology and computer science and the ways in which these disciplines can facilitate the translation of research findings into practice. Bernstam et al. (2009), for example, discuss the ways in which computer science can benefit translational research in medical settings.

This process, of translating research findings into practice, could be the focus of an autoethnographic account that is the autoethnography as an account of the experience of the change agent. The account would focus on the change strategies and the experience of managing changing and their interaction with the organisational culture. Practice of any kind is not straightforward: it can be messy; personalities are involved and the complexities and nuances of society are often reflected in practice settings. Rowlands (2016), for example, discusses the power inherent in practice, which leads to unequal positions. There is much tacit knowledge in practice as well as the organisational learning which leads to certain ways of doing things, as highlighted by the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who described the ways in which communities of practice developed with set patterns. The process of translational research can both highlight tensions and inequalities in the work place. The use of autoethnography can allow these tensions to be reflected on and described, and allows a consideration of the tacit knowledge and the confirmation and challenges inevitable in any change process.

The second type of knowledge is tacit knowledge; this is the type derived from practice and concerned with practical and intuitive knowledge. This knowledge is often not fully articulated. Polyanyi (2009) likens it to riding a bicycle, for those with the skill it is easy to do but difficult to describe. Within this approach, autoethnogrphy would explore practice and examine the skills and their implantation in practice, the focus would be on the skills, which may be at an individual or an organisational level. The wider culture of the organisation and the tension and challenges which are often inherent in developing practice would be part of the account as would be the useful of inherent skills which can bring about this change.

The third epistemological position is critical theory which focuses on the inequalities which are inherent in practice and this would be considered either from what the research perceives as a disadvantaged position or an advantaged one and how the practice can be more egalitarian. This is the paradigm in which most of the studies fall, implicitly and explicitly the studies are all concerned

with inequalities be it race, gender, immigrants, or social class. In organisations, there may be marginal groups, for example, administrators or/and technical staff may be perceived by many as peripheral but may have insights as to why something may work or could be more effective.

Much of the postmodernist approach stems from the work of Foucault and focuses on the use of power and regimes of truth. Taking this epistemological position, the researcher would be concerned with the discourses and the diffusion of power within the organisation and the ways in which the discourses are translated into discursive practices which, in turn, are reflected in rules and regulations.

Candy (2006) makes the point that practice research should lead to new knowledge which is applicable to and which will develop practice. The argument here is that the process of translational research which is concerned with evidenced based knowledge or knowledge from research findings being applied to practice. The research tends to be based on positivist studies; by implication, the process of translation is fairly straightforward. However, following the typology of Deertz (1995), the epistemological position of most ethnographic studies is critical theory or the post-modernist perspective, these approaches habitually focus on underrepresented groups. In autoethnographic studies, the focus is on the critical engagement of the person giving the account with society and one in which he or she is at odds with that society. Practice research can have a very different focus and, while the researcher may take a critical stance, the concerns are with the development of practice and the associated management of change. The focus can be on the application of research evidence to practice and the development and articulation of tacit knowledge. The use of autoethnography gives a very different perspective; it can illuminate the tensions and nuances inherent in practice. It can articulate both the tacit knowledge inherent in practice as well as giving a voice to the marginalised.

Anderson and Glass Coffin (2013) consider some key principles for autoethnography, which can usefully be applied to this context; visibility of the self, strong reflexivity, relational engagement, personal vulnerability, and an open-ended rejection of finality and enclosure. The presence of the

researcher central to the study or, as they put it, the 'I', is transparent. There is a strong reflexivity and, through this, the associated relational engagement, the process of the generation of knowledge about practice is created. It is important that the epistemology and the interaction of the various epistemologies is articulated and that their interaction is highlighted. The open-ended rejection of finality and closure and the transient nature of practice will be highlighted through the process of autoethnography.

Relational engagement and personal vulnerability are important; in this context, the researcher is central to the process. This places him or her in a vulnerable position but will also place colleagues in an equally vulnerable position. The process and product of autoethnography are both of importance; through the process, knowledge about practice will be generated. The final product will entail a detailed account of the process and, as well, the insights that have been generated. There is a tradition of evocative writing in autoethnography accounts; these are designed to evoke an emotive response for the reader. As such, the writing is not always in a traditional academic style. Indeed, many autoethnographers tend to write in a style more akin to a novel or, alternatively, via another medium such as painting or music. Autoethnography is a highly personal account. This needs to be reflected in the medium used. What is important is that there is a degree of analysis. Anderson (2006), for example, clearly differentiated between analytic and evocative autoethnographies. While analytic autoethnography is advocated for, in this context, there is a degree of involvement in the findings. It is important that this be recognised and acknowledged. A more subtle issue, that was highlighted by Humphreys and Learmouth (2010), is that in evocative autoethnography the ideological position of the researcher is present in a taken for granted manner and is not explored or developed

Insider/Outsider Position

The epistemological position determines the focus and direction of the research. In early ethnographic studies, the researcher was very much an outsider who conscious studied other cultures and made

intelligible what was strange and unfamiliar. Of course, through association, the outside would become involved and experience similar issues to the insider researcher. In recent studies and, particularly with emergence of the autoethnographic approach, the concept of 'insider research', the researcher is studying a group to which he or she belongs, has emerged.

The insider/outsider position is interesting and is one about which much has been written. Gold (1958) wrote about the different positions the researcher could take in ethnography; the complete participant in which the participants were part of the group and functioned as such, the participant as observer in which the he or she participated but in which his or her role as researcher remained explicit and acknowledged, or observer as participant in which more formal observation is required (and in which the participant is an explicit and detached observer). In ethnography, when in the field, the presence of the researcher is acknowledged (except in circumstances where the safety of the ethnographer may be compromised) and a degree of relationship-building is necessary to gain the detailed understanding required in ethnography. The researcher positions him or herself as participant as observer. All of which implies reality as a priori.

Merton (1967) wrote an oft-quoted paper on the insider-outsider dichotomy and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each position. This approach involves researching a group to which one belongs (as opposed to researching a group where one is an outsider). When discussing groups, the examples given are around gender and race that is characteristics that, for the most part are unchanging, so the advances of women researching other women or black American researching their fellows. Nonetheless, many of the principles are applicable to ethnography and autoethnographic research; they serve to highlight the complexity of the insider/outsider position in practice-based research. One can simultaneously belong to different group within an organisation; for example, as a male employee one belongs to a group of male employees particularly if males are in a minority. Similarly, social class may also be a divider. In terms of organisational roles, as manager, one may not be quite part of a group but in the role of manager also may be seen as separate from that group.

Banks (1998) saw the insider-outsider position as being on a typology in which there are four positions: *the indigenous insider* (fully integrated and holds the values of the community); *the indigenous outside* (someone who, while being a member of the community, questions its values and subscribes to values outside that domain), the external outsider, someone belonging to the outside culture and the external outsider someone belonging to a different culture. Banks was writing as a black American and was really considering the positionality of researching that particular group. He also emphased that, in the course of a research study, the position could change, for example, the outsider though emersion in the culture becomes an insider. The model can be translated into work-based practice; in the process of autoethnography and through the associated reflection, one can see oneself shifting positions from being an upholder of the organisation position to questioning its many assumptions and values.

In autoethnography, one is writing one's one experience in (usually) a work-related setting. While it can be an account of, say, one's experience as a woman in a environment or of one's experience as belonging to a particular racial group in a work-based setting, usually the one is accepted as an insider and belonging to that particular group. However, in the process of development, one's ideas can change; one can therefore question the values of the organisation. Alternatively, in implementing a resistant change and development of practice, one can find oneself as a clear outsider. It is therefore important to consider this and to focus on one's position. DeAndrake (2000), and Labaree (2002) see the insider/outsider position not so much as a fixed position but, rather, as a sliding-scale continuum. DeAndrake (2000) presented this as an axis; however, perhaps a sliding scale is a simpler analogy that more readily highlights the researcher constantly considering their position. This makes for both an interesting and insightful account.

By definition, practice-based research involves insider research; the researcher is usually part of the workforce and is the driving force behind many of the changes. Of course, it is rarely so simple. The researcher might be in a senior position and therefore, to a degree, will have outsider status, or he or

she may be a consultant brought into the situation to facilitate change and the change process; the autoethnographic account can focus on this. It is important that the insider position not be automatically assumed; rather, the focus is more on the positionality of the researcher. One of the first issues in ethnographic research is for the researcher to determine his or her position in the field. The characteristics of the researcher can dictate the degree to which he or she is accepted; this will consequently determine their positionality.

In terms of researching one's place of work, there are advantages and disadvantages. Labaree (2002) maintains that the insider position provides a decided advantage to the researcher in that he or she has shared experiences with other participants as well as access, an understanding of the culture, and a degree of empathetic understanding. There are, however, methodological and ethical issues that must be considered. Labarree (2002) and Allum (1999) discuss the methodological implications of being an insider and the way in which the insider position can potentially compromise the researcher's objectivity. In autoethnography, where the researcher's subjectivity and experience are highlighted, this may not be such an issue; however, the insider position gives rise to several ethical issues.

It is important to distinguish between procedural and micro-ethics (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005). Procedural ethics involve approval from an ethics committee; micro-ethics pertain to the ethical issues that can arise in practitioner research. There are many ethical issues inherent in practice research (Fulton & Costley 2018); these are similar to ethical issues common in autoethnography. The negotiation of relationships can be a difficult terrain, necessitating considerable management; further, these relationships can be altered during the research process. Associated with are the power relationships and the associated dynamics. The question arises: how free are individuals to say 'no'? Inevitably. they will be represented in the autoethnographic account and their identity may be difficult to anonymise. There are particular issues for the researcher, who may question the values and assumptions of the organisation.

There are no easy answers to these questions, but they need to be considered and reflected upon throughout the course of the research; they also can be discussed as part of the ethnographic account. According to the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, this is a type of wisdom concerned with practice action and doing the right thing; it is a guiding principle that makes us morally aware and can and should guide our actions (Carr, 1986; Costley & Gibbs 2006). This is an important and arguably underarticulated dimension in practitioner research; it should form part of an autoethnographic account.

Conclusion

The translation of research findings can be problematic; it requires many skills beyond just change management. This paper argues that the use of autoethnography can be a powerful tool in that process of translational research. Autoethnography is a highly subjective account but, in this content, through highlighting the process it explores and investigates – ultimately illuminating – professional practice. There is an underlying assumption that the evidence being translated into practice may be sound and applicable, yet still, autoethnography may explore and question this – particularly when the interaction with tacit knowledge is made explicit. However, practice research, to some extent, is in its infancy. While there is no formulaIc approach, there is a strong need to articulate and develop methodologies and methodological approaches. Autoethnography, as practice research, can be a powerful tool; however, it is not without its concerns and issues, with which researchers must grapple.

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