

Measuring up to my knowledge story

Introduction

While we tend to think of measurement in the context of this conference in terms of the metrics of impact factors, or achieving learning outcomes, or demonstrating 'value added' evidence in evaluating the effectiveness of schools, in this presentation, I wish to 'measure up' to my own knowledge story. This article also represents an attempt to engage philosophy of education with some ways of thinking that disturb some of its usual patterns of thought and analysis. The paper will present an autobiographical account, then consider what the account is able to offer that illuminates an auto ethnographic approach and contributes to philosophy of education.

Auto-ethnography is a narrative based methodology that is able to connect the personal and the professional (Dyson, 2007), and which provides a broader cultural and social context for a person's life experiences (Hernández, Sancho, Creus & Montané, 2010). The self-narrative is a way of bringing some kind of order to a chaotic world (Gill & Goodson, 2011), and yet takes advantage of the space offered by postmodernist and post-positivist views that regard the world as idiosyncratic. Ellis and Bochner (2000) detail several other terms by which auto-ethnography is known, however, common to many are the concepts of narrative and self-reflection, which O'Toole and Beckett (2010) see as figuring prominently in the notion of reflective practice.

For some years now, John Smyth's article, 'Developing and Sustaining Critical Reflection in Teacher Education' (1989) has become the staple diet of undergraduates' learning about critical reflection. In fact, the article has been diluted into the 'Smyth Model', so that while the steps proposed by Smyth in this short article have become widely referred to, there are certain aspects or features of his ideas that have not been understood, or have been conveniently forgotten. In particular, he developed ideas based on the work of Argyris and Schön (reflective practice), Dewey (democracy and education), Fay (critical theory), Freire, Mackie, McLaren, Shor and Smyth (critical pedagogy), Harris (teachers as workers), and Willis (disadvantaged youth). These ideas have a very strong component of turning theory into action—in other words, not simply analysing the world, but changing it. It is this final step in particular that has got lost. The 'Smyth Model' is a good example of using self-narrative as a reflective tool, and using one's own lived professional experience as research data.

Auto-ethnographic narrative is written in the first person, justified by Dyson (2007) as a way of ensuring a level of trust and accountability that is simultaneously risky and subjective. The writer is both research subject and researcher, and must, therefore declare his or her interests (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). From this perspective, the author is able to pan, zoom and draw back, able to see the 'big' socio-cultural picture in which the narrative is embedded, and focus on the personal triumphs and tragedies of a life lived in the larger context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As this form of writing turns the writer into the object of research, it crosses boundaries from traditional or conventional forms

of research writing to literary forms that could include poetry, visuals, short stories, journals and essays (2000). Ellis and Bochner point out common critiques of these forms of writing go to the questions of validity, reliability and generalisability. Verisimilitude is an accepted bar; and our lived experiences share enough common ground with others to allow for these to have potential meaning for others. There are other, ethical, warrants for engaging in narrative-based research, and this has been suggested in the form of a return to the practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, gained by reflection on life experience, over rationalistic approaches (Mason, 2007).

What follows are first some thoughts that help to contextualise the development of my knowledge story. I will then turn inward, and spell out my personal view—as it currently stands—on some aspects of the knowledge question. In this account, I will engage in the narrative in a fashion closely related to some of Smyth's suggestions. The article will conclude by way of some critical reflections on its content and process.

Some thoughts about knowledge

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), is a fine example of the influence of global trends and influences in education exerted by the likes of the OECD, UNESCO, The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (ref). I have noted elsewhere (2008; 2011; 2012) that knowledge has been 'hollowed out' of the curriculum, replaced instead with key competencies. Along with this hollowing-out is a sense that acquiring, holding and using knowledge seems to be less valued now than the ability to source useful information on an 'as and when' basis.

Even as I was first coming to express these thoughts, they were already being well developed by a number of sociologists of education, grouping themselves under the general heading of 'social realism' (cite Maton, Moore, Muller, and Young). The nub of their position is that there exists a body of mind-independent knowledge that it is possible to acquire, hold and modify. These bodies of knowledge arise in the context of communities of professional scholarship, usually anchored within the academy, and these communities exercise such scholarly disciplines as peer review to ensure that what counts as 'knowledge' in their respective fields does, in fact, represent and advance particular disciplines. Drawing on insights developed by Basil Bernstein, for example, these sociologists argue for strong, vertical discourses within various knowledge disciplines as being superior to more permeable, horizontal and integrated exchanges across disciplines. They are 'social' realists because they believe that knowledge is not static, but is developed from within the experiences and various knowledge-building processes of knowledge communities. They hold this position, despite roundly rejecting the constructivist notion that knowledge can be formed on the basis of a child's lived experience, or the postmodern notion that there is not a unitary discipline of knowledge, but multiple knowledges that are all valid. Indeed, social realists argue that some forms or representations of knowledge are superior to others.

Knowledge–building activity has been described and explained by the New Zealand social realist, Elizabeth Rata, in her recent work, *The Politics of Knowledge in Education*, in terms akin to Marxist concepts of material production. Namely, there is raw material (physical or symbolic); a mechanism of transformation (technology or theory); and a systematic process within social relations of production (plant or intellectual field). Crucial to a social realist understanding is that concepts underpin objective knowledge. That is, objectivity is derived from concepts that are stable, even if the context varies. Objectivity also stems from the critical review processes operating within knowledge communities. The theory of ‘paradigm shift’ proposed by Thomas Kuhn, in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is pertinent here. Kuhn showed how these communities operate, and, while these communities may come to hold fast to a particular set of theories or beliefs about knowledge in their own discipline (a ‘paradigm’), they do so only until this position is disrupted significantly by its failure to solve puzzles or problems presenting themselves. At the point of disruption, a crisis can be said to have occurred, and is resolved only when new evidence, approaches or methods are discovered or adopted, amounting to a ‘paradigm shift’.

A personal narrative

I have considerable sympathy for the social realist position, as I am of the view that there is knowledge, which may consist of hypotheses, theories, theorems, evidence, arguments, and proofs, that come together, or are brought together in broad, but defined areas that approximate to what can be termed ‘disciplines’. These could be as narrow as history, English literature, philosophy of education, or broad, like sciences, humanities or mathematics. They each have, within themselves, their various approaches to, and methods of, acquiring, testing and advancing their respective knowledge claims. In many instances, they find some kindred affiliation to other disciplines, making the cross–over between some of these disciplines both feasible and desirable, because such exchanges make the disciplines accessible and meaningful to a wider audience. These disciplines require, however, their own unique groups of experts, whom together form communities of professional enquiry, for the purposes of developing the approaches and methods by which their discipline is advanced and evaluated. These groups of experts gather in both physical and symbolic places, such as universities, conferences and journal publications. Not all knowledge is abstract or pure; in many cases, it must be turned to application, and practical applications of knowledge draw together their own communities of practical experts, who more commonly are located in polytechnics or colleges. Education and teaching are interesting examples of this phenomenon, with the practical and applied activity of teaching and teaching method located in the past in colleges of education. Progressive abstraction of our understanding of teaching in the 20th century, and arguments over the professional characteristics of teaching, led to colleges being merged with universities, forming schools, institutes and faculties of education. This point reminds me too that the raw material of teaching in schools is not a direct replica of the knowledge advanced

in either the academy or the technical institute—at best, it mimics some of the procedures and content of the disciplines. Its apparent purposes have included filtering and credentialing, while its less obvious purposes have included social control and reproduction of socio-economic inequalities. Little wonder then, that schooling continues to attract critical interest from scholars and public alike.

Some aspects of social realist discourse disturb my own attachment to critical pedagogy (and thus critical theory), my related belief in the merits of dialogical pedagogy, and my view that students ought to be active participants in the learning process. More generally, I dislike the notion that there should be predetermined outcomes, as these seem to me to rob the joy from teaching. I wince when hearing that teachers ought to engage in 'deliberate acts of teaching' (could one teach by accident?), or that the emphasis in schools ought to be on 'learning' and 'learners' (as if no learning is likely when teaching is taking place). I see in these features the growing instrumentality of the schooling process and the effects of neoliberal and neoconservative reform, leading to a fascination with 'what works'.

The next step in unpacking my auto ethnographic and self-reflective discourse on knowledge is to examine what may have led me to hold these views. I was born as an only child into a working class family (needless to say, I had to go to university to figure out that it was such a family!) My parents were descended from various European heritages, including Irish, French and German, though as the colonial history of South Africa stretches back to the 17th century, some of this lineage is murky. I have, more recently, discovered that the progenitor of my paternal line may have been a sailor on one of the early Dutch ships to make their way to the Cape in the 17th century. My paternal grandmother was deeply influential on my life. She spoke fluent German as well as English. She was a primary school teacher, and a person, I recall, of exacting standards and great precision. I spent significant periods of time with her, and so I assume some of her attitudes influenced me.

Despite his intellectual bent, deep interest in space travel and electronic communication (as it existed in the 1950s and 1960s), my father worked in a trade ('the radio trade' as he called it), and was essentially a blue-collar worker (though, it should be noted, he symbolically elevated himself by always wearing a white dustcoat in the workshop). My mother was never more than a wage clerk, though she was familiar with the Kalamazoo bookkeeping system, thus for a long while, she referred to herself as a 'bookkeeper'. Our living was humble, and most of my primary years were spent living in a 2 roomed, 5th floor apartment. My parents moved us to a rented house in a satellite town when I attended high school, so I could 'have more space'. Evidently then, I had parents who regretted their station in life, and it is no surprise that they encouraged me from young to not repeat their lives, but to ensure I took a university education.

My schooling was stable—apart from a change of primary after the first year when we moved from a country town to the city of Johannesburg, I attended one primary and one secondary school, the latter a working class boys' school, considered the 'Cinderella' of boys' schools in Johannesburg. We were known to

be the 'rough boys from the Valley'. The South African system of education—apart from its racially segregated and discriminatory structure, which prevailed until the early 1990s—was centrally organised around one of the many provincial or racial authorities. Despite the multitude of authorities, there was a high level of consistency and coherence in the structure of the school system and the content of what was taught. Rote learning of facts, theories, measures, tables and procedures was not uncommon. A highly stratified system, culminating in Matriculation examinations, prepared students for universities, polytechnics or the workplace, and, in the South Africa I was raised, the schooling system played its role as one of the state apparatuses that guaranteed compliance and maintained socio-economic discrimination.

If I had known something about resistance politics, postmodernism, or understood that universal narratives are something of a myth, I may have been better prepared for the university I attended. As it turned out, my good fortune was to be accepted to study at one of the leading English-language universities at the time, which also happened to be performing the role of any self-respecting university, namely by standing as a critic and conscience of society. There I discovered the languages and insights of liberalism, Marxism and critical theory. I also examined extensively the major works of English fiction, poetry and drama, learnt the indigenous and colonial history of the country, and the history of the great social movements and upheavals in Europe. My great love, however, was for the theories and discipline of education. In essence, I benefitted by a critical and liberal education, that provided me a strongly coherent, and largely unified perspective on the world around me. I had become deeply conscious of socio-economic disparities wrought by institutionalised racism, and had developed a distrust of bureaucrats, policy-makers and education policy.

If I learnt anything from the combined experience of school and university, it was that rote learning was meaningless and instead, teaching and learning should focus on using knowledge as a vehicle for attaining and developing intellectual and critical thinking skills and dispositions. I had recognised too, through my experience in adult literacy (among Black farm workers) and second chance schooling with adult Black students, the importance of student life as a text for learning. This life text was the bridge from low education attainment that provided little more than the hope of menial employment, to higher and more advanced attainment, that placed the individual in position to achieve greater material security. This life text also served as the bridge from what Freire (1985) called naïve and semi-transitive consciousness to a state of critical consciousness. I see here, in my thinking, influences ranging from Platonism, to liberal meritocracy and critical pedagogy. These all have their critics, however what I cannot alter are the material facts of my own upbringing, in a society that valued knowledge (and, to be sure, also turned it to evil ends), and that made me readily sensitive to the plight of the poor and marginalised, with a recognition that a valid form of resistance is to subvert from within. However, such subversion cannot happen from a position of ignorance or helplessness. It is knowledge, and the ability to critically evaluate, modify, transform and apply knowledge, that places individuals in positions and places where they are able to challenge prevailing orthodoxies, conventional wisdom and new fads.

So what do I change? Many of the base-line values and beliefs, developed out of my unique life's experience, remain unaltered. What I actively do is to seek ways to amend or update these in relation to new trends or pressures to change. This enables me to maintain some kind of currency and relevance—motivated, in part, I am sure, by occupational and publication pressures! What remains constant is the requirement to critique honestly and ethically, and not take what is said or written at face value. What also remains constant is the importance of acquiring, working with, adapting and using in transformative ways new interpretations, new insights, new theories—this is the stuff of knowledge building, and taken together with critical discernment, seem to be a personally satisfying way of living a professional life.

Critique

I see within my narrative several interesting lines of critique. The first, and most obvious, is my level of discomfiture with this mode of research and writing—my educational and professional research work should not be about *me*; rather, it should be focussed on rigorous analyses of the education scene of which I am but a small part. In this sense, I reveal my personal, rationalistic and analytical preferences, which recoil from the inward turn. Some other critics—perhaps auto-ethnographers and others—will identify in that self-admission traces of what they would regard as masculinist bias. Second, it is ironic that I discuss and propose auto-ethnography and narrative approaches in the same breath as I put forward views concerning knowledge which privilege certain forms of knowledge over others. A foundational view I hold is that while there may not necessarily be right and wrong arguments, there are better and worse ways of arguing. Similarly, while I am willing to accept that there may be some ways of knowing, or knowledge content and concepts that are more appealing to specific individuals or groups, I am not willing to buy the view that all knowledge is equivalent. In this regard, I may be criticised for holding culturally imperialistic, rationalistic or instrumentalist views. Regardless of how I choose to defend myself against such claims, what is true is that there is a contradiction between holding the view of knowledge that I do in the context of an article framed from a radically subjective, first-person perspective.

There is much to be said for engaging with one's own history and one's personal professional experiences. Expert auto-ethnographers would find in this article the initial, fumbling, efforts of a new-comer to this way of thinking and writing, possibly detecting promise, or predicting a hard road ahead. I am aware, from what little I have read, that notable philosophers, such as Noddings (1984, cited by Ellis & Bochner, 2000), Ricoeur (1992) and MacIntyre (1984) (both cited by Gill & Goodson, 2011), have contributed significantly to understanding narrative. This gives me some pause to consider the possibilities for my personal professional life, particularly as I further and develop my interest in thinkers such as Freire and Levinas, and expand my enquiries into the nature and role of reflective and reflexive practice by teachers.

Michael Dyson

MY STORY IN A PROFESSION OF STORIES: AUTO ETHNOGRAPHY - AN EMPOWERING
METHODOLOGY FOR EDUCATORS Australian Journal of Teacher Education
Volume 32, No. 1, January 2007, 36–48.

Title: Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: researcher as subject From:
Handbook of Qualitative Research, p. 733-768

Author(s): Ellis, C. And Bochner, A.

Publisher: California: Sage Publications, Inc.

Date: 2000

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power and liberation* (D.
Macedo, Trans.). London, United Kingdom: Macmillan.

Gill, S. & Goodson, I. (2011). Life history and narrative methods. In B. Somekh &
C. Lewin (Eds). *Theory and methods in social research*, pp. 157–165. London:
SAGE.

Hernández, F., Sancho, J. M., Creus, A., & Montané, A. (2010). Becoming university
scholars: Inside professional autoethnographies. *Journal of Research Practice*,
6(1), Article M7. Retrieved 28 June, 2013, from
<http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/204/188>

The Role of Epiphanies in Moral Reflection and Narrative Thinking:
Connectedness and Good Teaching

SHEILA MASON *Interchange*, Vol. 38/4, 351–366, 2007. DOI 10.1007/s10780-
007-9036-x

O'Toole, J. & Beckett, D. (2010). *Educational research: Creative thinking and
doing*. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.

Smyth, J. (1989). Developing and sustaining critical reflection in teacher
education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 2-10.