Pedagogies of Self: Conscientising the Personal to the Social

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Abstract

This paper considers the catalytic potential for autoethnography, one of the "new ethnographies" (Goodall, 2000), to provoke emancipatory consciousness raising activity. Autoethnography opens possibilities for the development of a critical reflexivity wherein senses of Self and agency might come to be understood in terms of the social processes that mediate lived experience and the material realities of individuals. It is on this basis that autoethnography offers opportunity for the enactment of a genuinely critical pedagogy. By means of exploring the Self as a social construct, possibilities for exposing the mediating role that social structures play in the construction of identities become apparent and open to deep critique and change.

Introduction

As we enter further this current age of increasingly globalised cultural practices and take stock of the variability, fluidity and change that this epoch brings, consideration of difference and the recognition of marginalised voice features as a significant imperative for those interested in emancipatory and democratic participation in public life. This is particularly so in critical education theory, with philosophical and theoretical positions such as critical pedagogy articulating the subjugation and privilege that occur within a range of societal contexts (particularly within the socialising location of the school itself) by offering critique of the processes of power, discourse and ideology that maintain marginalised peoples within 'submerged' positions (Freire, 1972, p. 11).

Freire (1972) in particular offers a location for the discussion of marginalisation through his pronouncement of conscientisation – the critical awakening of marginalised peoples and their 'oppressors' in order to engage a transformed and democratic social order. As Shaull (1972, p. 19) notes, "The term conscientisation refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality".

This is echoed by Shor's (1992) suggestion that conscientisation relates to:

> Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional cliches, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

With autoethnography as a method for critically engaging the Self as a socially constructed (and thereby reconstructable) entity, critical pedagogy's theoretical paradigm for challenging the operation of marginalisation finds a methodological collaborator. This paper identifies one such application of autoethnography in meeting the concerns of critical pedagogy through the realisation of Self as a social construct by a group of educators.

Education, Social Transformation and Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy draws its intellectual and activist orientations and philosophy from a number of distinct but connected streams. The work of Paulo Freire, commencing with his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), stands as seminal in this area. But prior to this the work of social reconstructionists such as George Counts (1932) and Theodore Brameld (1965) raised concerns of equality of education and the nature of the pedagogical processes that underpin the transmission of knowledge. These works broadly questioned the role of education's social imperatives and whether education should indeed transmit the functions of society or, as Counts notes, challenge beliefs and practices that maintain marginalisation by "build[ing] a new social order" (1932). The contributions of significant theorists and practitioners such as Giroux (1988), Kincheloe (2005), McLaren (1995), Shor (1987) and Weiler and Mitchell (1992) have further developed the central concerns expressed by Freire and identified locations and methods for critical pedagogy.

One of the crucial underlying beliefs of critical pedagogy and those who see teaching as something more than the reproduction of existing social relations is that a socially transformative education requires authentic knowledge of and connection with the experiences, histories and hopes of those who inhabit the margins. This means that educators must enact pedagogies of enablement, restraint and solidarity. By this we suggest that educators must give voice to those whose stories are typically unheard while at the same time opening for critique the dominant hegemonic narratives that would continue the silencing process. The end point of this is to contribute to the building of lines of connectivity among disparate groups within the classroom (and by extension the communities that these groups of individuals represent) with the goal of raising to visibility the imperative of emancipatory social solidarity and ultimately the realisation of more equitable and non-exploitative forms of social arrangement.

Attendant upon this particular philosophical orientation is a view of professional educational practice that aims to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions about the teaching–learning relationship, in effect to 'practice what it preaches'. The tension between domesticating and transformative pedagogies is perhaps best captured in Freire's (1972 p. 58) description of what he terms the "banking model" of education, where the privileging of hegemonic knowledge and sources of cultural authority leads to the maintenance of a culture of silence. Educators enacting a critical approach to their pedagogy work to unsettle such a culture.

From our perspective, socially transformative education draws both student and teacher into a consideration of their own positioning within the social dynamic, one that provokes the conscientisation necessary to understand the power of contemporary socialisation processes that support structures of inequality, oppression and exploitation as achieved largely through the colonising of mass or popular culture by the dictates and imperatives of global capital. A genuinely critical pedagogy would

also illuminate the roles of complicity that those not on the margins perform. That is, it seeks to examine the individual as much as the Other. To us, a critical practice of autoethnography is one way of opening up such an orientation. Through the interrogation of Self as a socially constructed entity, autoethnography encourages the critical appraisal of identity and the operations of those locations in which formations of identity are constructed.

Methods of Self Analysis: Autoethnography and the Excavation of the Self

Autoethnography as a formal, structured and recognised approach to the study of the Self has a relatively short history. The earliest acknowledged use of the term was in 1975, when Karl Heider (1975) coined the term to describe the ethnographic-type explanations of cultural constructs given by members of that cultural group. Whilst growing out of concerns with the difficulty of maintaining the pseudo-scientific objectivist façade of 'classic' anthropology, it has really been with the unfolding of the postmodern era and the ascendancy of the tenets of poststructuralist theory that the power of the individual, the significance of the 'new' evidentiary sources and forms of representation and the settling in of identity as the lynchpin of sociocultural research that accompanied these have brought the new ethnographies into prominence and relevance. While this is not the place to meander into the development of new forms of research into lived experiences, work by Denzin and Lincoln (2005a, 2005b) discussing what they have termed the nine moments of qualitative research offers an explanation of these new forms of research.

Of the many purposes to which autoethnographic approaches have and might be put, the view of autoethnography promoted by Holman Jones (2005) is one that seems to offer the greatest possibility of developing a social betterment orientation. Jones (2005, pp. 763-764) views autoethnography, the personal text, as "a critical intervention in social, political and cultural life", one that can "move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into this space of dialogue, debate and change". Similarly, Ellis (2004, p. xix) sees autoethnography as "research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political". This is a view shared by Spry (2001, p. 710) with her suggestion that autoethnography functions as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts". Neumann (1996, p. 189) adds that autoethnographic "texts democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power", which is furthered by Reinelt's (1998, p. 285) assertion that autoethnography operates as "a radical democratic politics – a politics committed to creating space for dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change". As such, autoethnography holds significance as a point of interrogation for critical, reflexive practice in education. It is from this perspective that we have applied autoethnography specifically with pre-service teachers in undergraduate university education programs.

Central here is the reflexive recounting of Self as a socially constructed entity. In the research projects that this paper is in part reporting on, we encouraged our participants to interrogate rigorously the social construction of their identities via three principal axes of identity: race, class and gender. From this position, our participants were asked to critique the locations that they inhabit and in the spirit of critical pedagogy to

draw into consideration their own silence and/or privilege in the social contexts that they encountered. From here, we asked our participants to anticipate the nature of their identity and how this would influence their own burgeoning pedagogies. What follows is a reporting of various participants' experiences with one of these axes of identity: race.

The Research Project

This project has been conducted over three years to date, and has involved several hundred undergraduate teacher education students and a smaller number of postgraduate and doctoral candidates. The essential purpose of the project has been to explore the impact of Self-focused, professional identity research on people intending to teach. In more standard ethnographic language, the authors are the principal researchers in this project, but both acknowledge the significant role performed by those with whom we have worked here.

The project, commenced with a small seeding grant from the University of Southern Queensland, has involved the use of extensive participant observation, learning conversations (Thomas & Hari-Augstein, 1985), various forms of visual data gathering (primarily still photographic and video recording) and the collection of documentary and realia forms of evidence. Verbal data (interviews and learning conversations) have been digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Poland's (1995) transcription protocols and accuracy checks have been applied to all transcriptions and have provided evidence of high levels of accuracy. Data analysis conducted to date has been organised around Dey's (1993) five stages of qualitative data analysis and coding and associated categorisation of data have been conducted using NVivo 7 software (QSR International, 2006).

Autoethnography as Critical Pedagogy

Analysis of the collected data has thus far revealed connections between this autoethnographic approach to reflexive consciousness raising activity and a conscientising of social positionings in our participants. It has emerged that a continuum of conscientisation has developed through the critical interrogations of Self engaged in by our participants. Whilst we acknowledge that the approach doesn't do all things for all participants, and that from our analysis we have identified that some participants owing to factors of life experience, predisposition to this type of work and similar other factors are more likely to reach a point of critical consciousness, we have noted that our participants tend to progress through the following stages in their interrogation of Self and conscientisation:
1) Recognition of Self as a social being formed via a range of social processes
2) Engagement with critical consciousness raising activity in terms of gender, race and class as socially formative constructions
3) Conscientisation and the enactment of critical pedagogical concerns as central tenets of a burgeoning practice.

One example of this, following the generative approach to prompting critical reflection detailed by Shor (1992), includes a focus group activity in which one of the authors as provocateur retold a story from his own experience dealing with the marginalisation of an Indigenous Australian student by the classroom teacher. Whilst this story was intentionally provocative, it was re-told from the point of view of the

author's positioning within the scene. Participants were asked to consider the aspects of this story, particularly its racialised aspects, and recount their reactions to it. The visceral nature of the story resulted in many students asking how the actions that were reported in the story could take place, how the student came to be placed in this position and how the school community, in this instance, could condone the actions. What emerged was a problematising of the student's experiences as an Indigenous Australian and how race (in this case) functioned as a corporeal aspect of his Identity – one that in this situation marginalised him – whilst at the same time (and at his expense) affirmed those of the 'white' students in his class.

Following this, the participants were encouraged to recall their own experiences utilising autoethnographic methods of re-presentation. Essentially this involved students in the first stage of this process performing 'memory work'. The "deliberate act of remembering" (Morrison, 1984) specific life experiences grounded in the axes of identity formed the principal database from which the participants interrogated their identities. From the retelling and recording of their experiences, and the initial critical interrogation that followed from this, movements towards realisations of the social arbitration of identity formation emerged. We found that it was at this point of the process that a realisation of Self became apparent for the bulk of participants. Intentionally willing a memory into an interrogative frame provided the participants with an opportunity to consider the functions of their formation and the positioning that they found themselves within in a range of cultural contexts.

It is important to note here that "There is no pretense that one is on a mission to reconstruct the Truth of a life lived" (Austin, 2005, p. 21) and that:

> …[t]he intention is to open up the past for interrogation in the present so as to contribute to a greater self-awareness and self-understanding. How I am today is in part the result of how I have acted, believed, rejected, derided, ignored and embraced certain views of the world, and in this, my worldviews haven't been the sole creations of myself, but the outcomes of interactions between myself and the array of social…forces that have acted upon me. (Austin, 2005, p. 21)

Participants were encouraged to remember events that included the 'mundane' and not just the extraordinary. One of the benefits of inquiring into the mundane or the everyday was that when our participants started to look with fresh eyes they found that they had been immersed in who they were as subject matter for such a long time that aspects of their identity as subject matter became largely invisible. The trick was to make explicit that which had been submerged into the implicit, experienced as the everyday and judged as the ordinary. It was particularly via these 'everyday' occurrences and experiences that a sense of who each participant was emerged. One participant recalled her experience of dating:

> Race, what race am I? I could tell you that I am French, Irish, Australian and I could go into detail about what it means to be this, but it still comes back to the fact that I am "white". And I have had all the privileges that "white" people have. I have a very striking memory of dating a 'black African' man, got a lot of odd looks when we were out together, and when our work found out that we were dating he was told that "you know you are not allowed to date the 'white girls' in the store. You will be moved to a smaller store and just thank your lucky stars that you are not fired." I was told "we would rather you date your own kind". I never thought of racial difference until being in this relationship, it

hit me hard the cape of privilege that I have. I by no means want to seem ungrateful for the privilege I have received being white as I realise how much harder it would have been for me to achieve the same things in my life had I been 'non white'. (Chloe, April 2007)

It was the initial questioning of the forces impacting on identity that functioned as the hallmark of this stage of the autoethnographic process. Emerging critical consciousness and the recognition of the Self within a social dynamic that was fluid and variable were common features at this point.

The second stage of this autoethnographic process involved participants connecting their recalled experiences with social practices in order to understand their location within the social dynamic and the nature of their identity formation. From this, analysis of the axes of identity investigated by the students – race, class and gender – were theorised in order to 'make sense' of the identity formation that each participant had undertaken. Questions surrounding what each participant 'intuitively knew' or 'took for granted' as race, class and gender were opened for critique, with the critical exploration of the assumptions that informed views of the axes of identity undertaken. In a similar fashion to the critique of popular culture performed by Giroux (2001), artifacts from popular culture, theoretical sources and first person accounts of race, class and gender were explored and relayed onto the participants' recounting of their own memories. The point was to engage popular conceptions of the axes of identity in terms of how each is represented and deployed in social contexts. It was at this point that the participants began to take stock of the constructedness of race, class and gender and the way that lived experiences are largely mediated by discursive and hegemonic structures. This was a point of consciousness raising interrogation of the Self, and the point at which participants began to account for their formation as social beings.

Finally, the students were asked to deploy this new understanding of Self in their burgeoning practice and pedagogy. This final stage involved participants actively considering their conscientisation in their professional experiences and reflexively exploring their responses to classroom practice. Further work is underway on this stage of the process, with examination of the intent of conscientisation, an inspiration to act, being explored in formal teaching contexts. From our dealings with this project, our participants report being more acutely aware of the discursive and hegemonic structures that arbitrate identity formation and are demonstrating in their own practice the significance of emancipatory pedagogies that encourage liberatory practices.

The outcomes of this project demonstrate the depth to which the participants engaged the conscientising element of this autoethnographic process. As one participant noted in considering his heightened awareness of the racialised aspects of his identity: "I never really considered race before – I don't think I'm racist. But after I thought about it, I realised that, while I haven't done anything bad in terms of race, neither had I done anything good. (Jake, May 2007)

This follows comments made by another participant:

I am striving to become a critical educator, to be a teacher that can give my students hope in the world, to open up the opportunities they want, to give them

the power to question authorities. I am 'Reaching to Teach', because I am not yet there. I don't feel confident just yet in being able to give all that I want to give to my students. (Jacinta, April 2007)

While there isn't space to engage with the full extent of the data in this paper, we have found that participants have engaged a critically active sense of Self – a conscientised awareness of identity formation and understanding of the marginalising (and privileging) functions of a range of social structures. While the interrogative frame of this project dealt primarily with three axes of identity – race, class and gender – we have seen our participants extend beyond this with questions of age, religious affiliation and other similar markers of identity and how these function as classifying categories.

Perhaps most significantly, we have found our participants begin to articulate the concerns of critical pedagogy in their own practice. While we are currently undertaking further research examining the processes of conscientisation and pedagogy in practice, initial evidence suggests that our participants actively interrogate their positionings as social agents and those of their students and take into account social contexts as formative influences on identity.

Conclusions: Where are We at with Critical Pedagogy?

The concerns and importance of critical consciousness raising work amongst educators are noted by Yahner (2003):

I'm chagrined to admit that I've encountered precious few critical educators, teachers who interrogate the ideological power structures woven through the very fabric of our educational institutions, teachers who seek to identify whose interests the knowledge they are passing on really serves. (para. 4)

In this sense, to be an effective educator means acknowledging the real conditions of existence and taking stock of the experiences that form identity. Autoethnography offers an opportunity for the engagement of a conscientised sense of Self and the development of emancipatory practices and pedagogy.

This fits with the theoretical exposition of critical pedagogy suggested by Freire. For Freire (1972, p. 54), "The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own conscientisation".

What autoethnography opens is an opportunity for dialogue between the subject and the social practices that they've engaged throughout their existence. This translates into an interrogation of the lived experiences via memory work and a sense-making of these understandings of Self. From these critical realisations of the processes of identity formation, conscientised approaches to understanding the world, critiquing the various power structures that moderate it and, perhaps most significantly, transforming these understandings into emancipatory professional practice feature as significant outcomes. Autoethnography, as a way of mobilising the theoretical intent of critical pedagogy, holds real significance as a method interested in interrogating constructions of Self and enabling emancipatory pedagogical practices. More widely, perhaps it also has potential for the engagement of a larger social dynamic outside the professional parameters of education alone. As a necessarily social practice, education

is intimately connected with the concerns of the social contexts that it functions within. On this basis, autoethnography as a method for engaging Self, identity and critical formations of each of these categories finds application in the excavation of the material realities of the social contexts in which it is deployed. It is here that the potential for autoethnography as a significant method for the critical realisation of a range of individuals is opened via emancipatory pedagogical practice.

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