

Dr Peter deVries

Faculty of Education

University of Technology, Sydney

PO Box 222

Lindfield NSW 2070

Ph 95145381

Fax 95145556

Symposia

Title of paper: Using Autobiography in Arts Education

This paper will describe how I used autobiography to examine my lived experience as a primary school music teacher.

An Excerpt

I am transferred to a school which has had three different music teachers in the last six months. These teachers have either resigned or requested a transfer out of the school ...

I began a sequential, developmental program. However, the grade sevens were not working at a grade seven standard (as established by the curriculum). Rather, they were working at a grade three or four standard.

I started recorder with the grade sevens.

Mistake. Even though a recorder was on their book list, only a few children owned one.

Solution: buy class sets of recorders which could be used when the children came to music.

We begin: at the beginning. Two and three note songs.

But ...

It's chaos. I spend ten or fifteen minutes a week on recorder in class. But that is the only recorder the students do all week. They don't have recorders to take home and practise on. And class teachers do not wish to do reorder follow-up, even though I try hard to sell the idea in a staff meeting. It appears they have tried before and recorders have been used as weapons rather than as musical instruments.

How can the class possibly progress on an instrument if, as an entire group, they only spend fifteen minutes on the instrument each week?

I take the easy option: we cease playing the recorder.

But I want them performing. Most students like to *perform*. But the only performing we are doing is singing.

I want more.

We have plenty of classroom percussion instruments, so I order the percussion charts I used at my previous school: pop percussion; folk percussion; multi-cultural percussion; classical percussion.

The children love it. And not only are they making music as an ensemble, but they are starting to score read too.

In an ideal world the next step would be to get the class writing.

Problem: the class have no music books. They're supposed to, but the majority don't. So I do what I did with recorders: I buy a book for each child and provide pencils.

But these children detest writing.

Well maybe the tasks at hand aren't fun. Activities such as working out note names and doing rhythm sums and working out where barlines go. So I find some photocopiable books which set such activities out in a fun way, where the activities are more like puzzles.

A slight improvement, but still a large number of students will not do this writing.

I mention this to some class teachers. They have the same problem: their children do not like to write.

Why? A lot of them can barely write. Or read.

But is that my problem? I'm the music teacher; I'm not here to teach reading and writing. I'm here to teach music. Aren't I?

So I scrap the music writing. We stick with music performance. Singing and action and games and percussion.

It works. And I stick with this game plan for twelve months.

How it Started

In October 1996 I was nearing the end of a Master of Education degree that I had been pursuing at night while teaching primary school classroom music during the day. I was thinking about enrolling in a Ph.D. The problem, however, was finding a topic that I felt very passionate about.

During the Christmas vacation I planned to pursue my hobby of creative writing. Over the previous seven years my vacations had been filled writing short stories, crime novels, romance novels, and children's fiction. Plans were made to begin a second crime novel. However, when I sat down to write it, I was without enthusiasm. What I wanted to write was something far more personal, so for the first time I began writing without a specific plan--I just wrote what came into my head.

Five thousand words later I stopped to read what had been written. This was not the story of my life, but rather the story of how I "fell" into the teaching profession. It was not a work of fiction, but a true account of what had happened to me. Without further thought I decided to continue writing this autobiographical account of my teaching experiences.

Half way through writing the first draft of the narrative I realised that the end product, the "novel," could also be used as data for a research project about a music teacher, that music teacher being me.

Autobiography

The person who writes her/his own life history is writing an autobiography. Abbs (1974) writes, "The central concern of all autobiography is to describe, evoke and generally recreate the development of the author's experience" (p. 6).

Autobiography may be described as the life story of just one individual who is the central character of the life drama which unfolds ... As an idiosyncratic rendering of lived experience, it is personal both in its selection of events and in its expression or style. As such, the search for unity and coherence (order), characteristic of traditional forms of educational enquiry, gives way to disunity and incoherence (chaos) in life. Autobiography allows a person to impute meaning to, not "the" meaning of life. (Solas, 1992, p. 212)

Autobiography can never be "objective" in the sense of providing universal truths, or as Solas comments, it cannot provide "the" meaning of life. Rather, it allows the autobiographer to impute meaning into her/his life. The uniqueness of autobiography is the very fact that

no one can know better than I what I have thought, what I have wished; I alone have the privilege of discovering myself from the other side of the mirror - nor can I be cut off by the wall of privacy. Others, no matter how well intentioned, are forever going wrong; they describe the external figure, the appearance they see and not the true person, which always escapes them. (Gusdorf, 1980, pp. 35-36)

It is this "knowing" of oneself that allows autobiography to provide a picture of an individual that no other method can provide. However, "it will be necessary to struggle against failures of memory and temptations to fudge the truth, but a sufficiently strict moral alertness and a basic good faith will make it possible to reestablish the factual truth" (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 40).

One of the great advantages of using autobiography is that it allows successive questioning and probing (Denzin, 1989, p. 191). This does, to some degree, compensate for failure of memory and "fudging" of the truth, since

the selection of some events and the exclusion of others, the repudiation of some feelings and the acknowledgement of others remind us that these accounts never can exactly coincide with our experience ... nevertheless, the abstractions of primary experience presented in these autobiographical reflections are vulnerable to critical scrutiny. The writer can turn back upon her own texts and see there her own processes and biases of selection at work. (Grumet, 1980, p. 155)

This is essentially what I knew I would have to do following the initial analysis of my autobiographical narrative: go back over the events portrayed to see what had been

fictionalised, what had been left out, and what was exaggerated; or in other words, "questioning and probing" myself.

From Autobiography to Research

As a researcher I found myself in an unusual position: in writing my narrative I had "collected data" before formulating research questions, conducting a literature review, and establishing a methodology. Ely et al. (1991) assert that "qualitative researchers depend on the field to help them ask questions [and thus] it is not a good idea to enter the field with questions that are too specific, or too tight, or too slanted" (p. 56). When writing the narrative I was not consciously attempting to answer specific questions. Even after completing the narrative I was hesitant about establishing specific questions when the research was only in its infancy. However, I needed something to start with--a direction and focus that a research question or questions could provide.

The immediate problem that arose from the autobiographical narrative was the need to uncover and examine the problems facing primary school classroom music teachers in the state I was working in--that is Queensland, Australia. However, I realised I wanted to do more than this: I wanted to understand more about what being a classroom music teacher meant *to me*. Therefore the project would be a discovery of self, and the primary research question to be asked would be *what is the nature of this lived experience?*, the experience being teaching music.

Design

A research design emerged for my study, consisting of the following stages:

1. Writing the autobiographical narrative;
1. analysing the autobiographical narrative, drawing the essential themes from it;
2. reflecting on these themes, and more specifically the "reality" of events and perceptions expressed in the autobiographical narrative that contributed to these themes;
3. interviewing characters from the autobiographical narrative to reflect on the themes that emerged from the autobiographical narrative; and
4. documenting the research literature on each theme to gain a greater insight into each theme and determine what my experiences can contribute to this body of literature.

Each of the five stages of the study involved analysis, including the initial writing of the autobiographical narrative, with decisions being made as to what to write "next" stemming from analysis of what had been previously written. However, the autobiographical narrative was not consciously written around any specific themes. These themes emerged during and after the writing of the narrative.

The second stage of analysis was of critical importance because the themes that emerged determined the direction of analysis in subsequent stages. Drawing themes from data is a phenomenological method of analysis. "A theme can be defined as a statement of meaning that (1) runs through all or most of the pertinent data, or (2) one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual imput" (Ely et al., 1991, p. 150). Van Manen (1990) describes a theme as the form of capturing the phenomenon that one is trying to understand; a theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience (p. 87).

The third stage of the study--reflecting on these themes, and more specifically the "reality" of events and perceptions expressed in the autobiographical narrative that contributed to these

themes--centred around the questioning and probing of self. This involved the identification of both my subjectivity and the fictionalisation that occurred in the autobiographical narrative.

The fourth stage of the project, interviewing characters from the autobiographical narrative, took a phenomenological approach in that the interviewing was not so much used to gather material, but to reflect with the interviewee about teaching and the events portrayed in the autobiographical narrative. These interviews brought multiple perspectives to aspects of my teaching career in the form of how others viewed me and the context in which we worked as teachers.

Finally, the research literature associated with each emergent theme was documented and examined to determine how it impacted on an understanding of the theme, and specifically what my experiences contributed to existing literature.

It is not the purpose of this paper to describe in any detail what the themes were. I will simply state that four themes emerged: 1) my life outside school impacted on my work as a teacher; 2) my knowledge of "how to be a teacher" stemmed from pre-service training, teachers I observed at work, teachers and administrators I worked with, and in-service undertaken; 3) my philosophy of music education changed as I moved from school to school; and 4) being a classroom primary school music teacher is very different from being a general classroom teacher.

Autobiography and Arts Education

I believe writing and autobiography and then analysing it can be beneficial for any educator, whether they be an arts educator or not. I found, however, that as I wrote, I made sense of this past, presenting it in my own way, interpreting my experiences into words. In this way the writing of the narrative was almost like performing a piece of music. That is, taking the ingredients given (in the narrative my past experiences; in music a piece of composed music) and *personally interpreting* these ingredients into work that was stamped with the performer's/writer's individuality. This method of presenting/collating data was artistic, and thus ideal for a teacher of one of the arts.

The writing of the autobiographical narrative was significant to me personally, initially as a catharsis, and subsequently as an examination of my teaching and teaching beliefs. In the analysis of the narrative I was able to "make sense" of my teaching experiences by understanding the nature of the lived teaching experiences. This "making sense" of experience is not likely to mean as much to the reader as it does to me--or at least that is how it may initially appear because my experiences are not immediately seen as "generalisable." However, Eisner (1981) suggests that

artistic approaches to research have no comparable mechanism for generalization. But this should not be interpreted to mean that generalization is not possible. While it is sometimes said that ideographic research does not generalize, I think such a conclusion is incorrect. But if so, then how does one generalize from a nonrandomly selected single case? Generalization is possible because of the belief that the general resides in the particular and because what one learns from a particular one applies to other situations subsequently encountered ... Consider literature as an example. Is it the case that Saul Bellow's novel *Mr Sammler's Planet* is simply a story about Arthur Sammler and no one else? Is Shakespeare's portrayal of Lady Macbeth simply about a particular Scottish noblewoman who lived in the later part of the 11th century? Hardly. What these writers have done is to illustrate significant, common human attributes by the way they have written about

particular individuals. Artistic approaches to research try to locate the general in the particular. They attempt to shed light on what is unique in time and space while at the same time conveying insights that exceed the limits of the situation in which they emerge. (p. 7)

In having told my story in the autobiographical narrative, "the general in the particular" has been told, or as Herr & Anderson (1993) indicate, such narratives go beyond the Self to common dilemmas.

Five (1992) writes, "It seems I engage in teacher research even when it comes to studying and writing about myself. The data I discovered about my own writing process were cause for further reflection" (p. 51). This has been true for me. Reflecting on myself has been research. Even though the study was intensely subjective, it was *research* because research is something that benefits others--in this case me, first of all, and possibly others with the implications of my lived experience and the way I have interpreted/analysed this lived experience.

My approach to the study has confirmed what Roberts (1994) advocates: that a shift in research paradigm to phenomenological methods that involve teachers in the research process on a personal level can help break the lack of involvement of music teachers in research (p. 24). In using an essentially phenomenological approach to research whereby I was involved on a very personal level, I produced work that is personally meaningful to me and, hopefully, to a broader audience. I therefore have, as Roberts states, ownership of my research because what I have studied is my lived experience in the classroom. In having conducted such research I have engaged in in-depth self-awareness of myself as a person and music teacher. This, as Hamalainen (1998) indicates, is vital for the professional well-being of the teacher.

References

- Abbs, P. (1974). *Autobiography in education*. London: Heinemann.
- Denzin, N. (1989). *The researcher: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Eisner, E. (1981). On the differences between scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher, April*, 5-9.
- Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D., & Steinmetz, A. (1991). *Doing qualitative research: Circles within circles*. London: Falmer.
- Five, C. (1992). Teacher research: Catalyst for writing. In Dahl, K. (Ed.), *Teacher as writer: Entering the professional conversation*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Grumet, M. (1980). Autobiography and reconceptualizing. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 2, 155-158.
- Gusdorf, G. (1980). Conditions and limits of autobiography. In Olney, J. (Ed.), *Autobiography: Essays theoretical and critical*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hamalainen, K. (1998, July). The development of competence and expertise in the field of teaching music. Paper presented at the 23rd International Society for Music Education in Pretoria.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. (1993). Oral history for student empowerment: Capturing students' inner voices. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 6(3), 185-196.
- Roberts, B. (1994). Music teachers as researchers. *International Journal of Music Education*, 23, 24-33.
- Solas, J. (1992). Investigating teacher and student thinking about the process of teaching and learning using autobiography and repertory grid. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 205-225.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Ontario: Althouse.



Dr Peter deVries

Faculty of Education

University of Technology, Sydney

PO Box 222

Lindfield NSW 2070

Ph 95145381

Fax 95145556

Symposia

Title of paper: **Using Autobiography in Arts Education**