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Taking an autoethnographic perspective: On becoming a member of a tertiary community.

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Abstract

Within the field of qualitative research, autoethnography is becoming more widely known as a useful and appropriate approach. This form of self-narrative places the self within a social context and as a result a person learns how they are defined by the world, and how to redefine themselves and their relationships with others through on going reflection.

This paper discusses a project that aimed to investigate individual learning at different organizational levels within a developing university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over a three year period. I will define autoethnography, outline the aims of the project and explore the nature of individual learning within the social context of a UAE university setting. Informal and implicit learning at different organisational levels and the impact of organisational cultural agents on that learning are discussed. The development of identities of self as an individual negotiates an organisation are addressed. I will also discuss the strengths and challenges when studying informal and implicit teacher learning and suggest future directions for research. Finally, the paper will identify ways in which methodology used in this specific context has applicability for offering fresh ideas and creative solutions within a broader international context.

Introduction

This paper discusses a project that aimed to investigate individual learning at different organizational levels within a developing university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over a three year period. Drawing on autoethnographic approaches, I used self-narrative to explore my own learning. Placing the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997) enabled me to learn about myself and others by reflecting on the self, in social action with others. I accessed lived emotions and experiences within the University context. As advocated by Ellis and Bochner (2000), I drew on field notes of intense emotion as well as reflecting back when I was more emotionally distant.

In keeping with autoethnographic approaches, which encourage alternative forms of writing, in this paper I use autoethnographic genres to promote the reader’s empathetic participation in the lived experiences shared within it (Saks, 1996). For example, the poem below aims to capture the complexity of my own journey as a learner over the three-year period. The poem highlights how my learning changed significantly over the period during which the study was conducted. Later in this paper, a monologue and dramatic dialogue detail the impact of organisational cultural agents on individual learning. The challenges of using autoethnographic approaches are discussed and future directions for research are also suggested.
Learning to become a member of an organisation

Social theories of learning recognise that learning in the workplace is both a cognitive and social activity (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, Nicolini & Odella, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lemke, 1997; Wenger, 1998). Gherardi et al (1998:274) state that learning in the workplace must be understood as a cognitive and social activity. They argue that learning is not an individual process separated from our daily activities and experience but rather occurs by acting, reflecting and talking with others. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) practice based theory of learning takes the position that learning occurs in communities of practice. Similarly, Brown & Duguid (1991:41) argue that “the composite concept of ‘learning in working’ best represents the fluid evolution of learning through practice.” Their position is that through the practices of communities, work, learning and innovation are influenced and enhanced and that learning in the workplace is best understood in terms of the communities being formed or joined and the identities being changed (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

Wenger (1998) likewise takes the view that learning occurs in both the context of lived experience and through social participation. For him social practice is the fundamental process by which learning occurs. When people interact together in a particular social setting, community or culture they learn and evolve.

Cognitive activity is part of our everyday social configurations, social practices, situated experiences and social formation as well as how such learning occurs through our social and cultural networks (Gherardi et al, 1998; Wenger, 1998). This social learning perspective provides a conceptual framework for thinking about individual learning and university culture because it integrates the components necessary to characterise social participation. It also recognises the intersubjectivity of organisational knowledge and the interpretative nature of the learning process (Mahler, 1997; Lemke, 1997; Wenger, 1998).
Key elements in the learning process include ongoing practice, communication, relationships, power, interpretation and subjectivity. When individual members struggle together to apply their experience to routines, address conflicts and solve problems learning occurs through sharing interpretations, reflecting on those interpretations and taking action in response. This action and reflection can result in changed practices.

Learning is thought to be an especially informed and effective type of change because it represents conscious effort to interpret and analyse results in order to correct problems rather than blind reaction to crisis (Mahler, 1997: 519).

Nonaka (1994) argues that organisational knowledge and learning is the result of continuous dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge. Individuals, groups and organisations can change tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. That is, where there are people in interaction, learning exists.

Not surprisingly studying informal learning and the emotionality of learning is challenging for researchers. Implicit learning can be problematic to detect without extensive observation. It is possible to show changes in behaviours and actions but not changes in thoughts or awareness. Therefore, I adopted an autoethnographic case study methodology to allow learning to be measured as action, changed practice and/or raised awareness. I explored the appropriateness of using such a methodology to analyse and interpret individual learning at different organisational levels. This autoethnographic methodology is discussed in detail later in this paper.

An Organisational Cultural Theory of Learning

Recent studies of learning challenge the separation of what is learned from how it is learned and used (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Clancey, 1995; Lemke, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998). Brown and Duguid (2000) and Gherardi et al. (1998) found that people who actively apply knowledge and skills through participation in and interaction with their environments, rather than merely acquire knowledge gain a better implicit understanding of the world in which they use these skills. “Learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with and arising from the socially and culturally structured world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991:51). Individuals’ understanding of their worlds, knowledge and skills continually changes as a result of their interaction. Thus, learning and activity contribute to each other and learning, cognition and communication in, and with the social world are fundamentally situated in the historical development of ongoing activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991:51). Learning, then, is viewed as a life-long process resulting from interaction and action in situations (Brown et al, 1989: 36).

Even though our experience of knowing is individual, knowledge and learning is embedded in human activity (Giddens, 1979). Therefore, individual learning within an organisation is conceptualised as a cultural and social phenomenon.

Theorising about social practice emphasises the interdependency of agent, world, activity, cognition, meaning, learning, and knowing (Lave & Wenger, 1991:50). This view claims that learning, thinking and knowing occur as a result of relations among people participating in their sociocultural worlds. Learning, meaning and understanding should therefore be defined in relation to contexts of human action as opposed to self contained structures. If we are to understand what organisational members in social settings do and say, we must investigate not simply their actions, nor even patterns of actions; but the systematic patterns of significance, which these actions have for those participants, and for those with whom they interact. Rather than studying behavioural categories, social acts are the focus, defined primarily by people’s
interpretations, rather than by empirical characteristics (Clancey, 1995; Lemke, 1997). In this view, the study of culture is the study of both understandings and contested meanings.

As Lave & Wenger (1991:51) state, “Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world.” Rather than an individual acquiring knowledge in the abstract, I agree with Brown and Duguid (2000), Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002), that learning involves both the acquisition of knowledge and the appropriate application of that knowledge in a variety of contexts. Through social practice within specific contexts individual identities are created and defined.

Several authors state that knowledge belongs to human communities and knowing and learning occur as a result of participation in communities (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Lemke, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Within communities individuals define their social interaction and the relations that develop. It is important to consider the differences in the act of learning and the state of being in a community. That is, learning is not only derived from membership within communities, it is also an evolving form of membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991:53). Thus, learning and becoming a community member are different yet interdependent. In order to master knowledge and skills newcomers in organisations gradually move towards becoming full participants in the practices of the communities in which they work (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Changing membership as well as participation can, therefore, neither be completely internalised nor completely externalised. Learning in the workplace, then, is best understood in terms of the communities being formed or joined and individual identities being changed (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al. 2002).

In summary, I have argued that individual learning in an organisation is an interactive social process. My view of learning focuses on the whole person as sociocultural community member, rather than solely as individual cognitive entity. Learning to become a member of an organisation means learning job and task information, understanding one’s position in relation to the rest of the organisation and establishing social interaction with other organisational members (Stephenson, 2004). Following Lave (1988), Lave & Wenger (1991), and Tierney (1997), learning to become a member of an organisation includes the acquisition and utilisation of skills, knowledge, social behaviour, the culture and its social rules. That is, becoming a member of an organisation means learning what to do, learning how to be and going through a socialisation process.

I propose that in order to investigate learning we should look at the interaction between the context for the learning, the kinds of social engagements that provide an appropriate context for learning to occur and the creation of individual and social identities (Stephenson, 2004). As an individual learns to cope in a specific workplace organisational cultural agents interact enabling individuals to make meaning of and create their social worlds. In practice, this means that at the individual, team and organisational levels, organisational cultural agents interact with a person’s internal framework, thus impacting an individual’s learning to become a member of an organisation (Stephenson, 2004). The learning that occurs at these different levels is context and culture specific.

Following Meyerson and Martin (1987), I suggest many of the organisational systems in which we individually and collectively learn and unlearn are deeply fragmented. These systems evolve as individuals react and interact to problem solving, crises and previous experience. Thus, it is through work processes and relations at different organisational levels that people create, discover and experience the fragmentary nature of organisational culture. This interaction leads to the formation of social networks, cultures and subcultures where consensus, indifference and conflict occur simultaneously (Stephenson, 2004). Thus, within a cultural background, at the individual...
and group level, people judge their learning to become organisational practitioners (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Learning, therefore, is both an individual and a social experience that links the individual to the social world (Mullins, 1996). Individuals experience the socialisation process in their own unique ways and interpret the learning process differently from each other.

Socialising elements such as systems of relationships, norms, symbols, power relations, and communication impact individual thought, behaviour and learning (Giddens, 1979). As Brown et al. (1989:35) argue, “activity, concept, and culture are interdependent. No one can be totally understood without the other two. Learning must involve all three.” An organisation needs leadership, communication, and work processes and relations to function. The nature and impact of these socialising elements depends on the organisation's overall purpose. These socialising elements are not static but, rather, vary as the organisation goes about its daily operations resulting in learning, unlearning and change at a different organisational levels. Therefore, one must look at these socialising elements operating within an organisation. I term these elements organisational cultural agents and it is the organisational cultural agents of leadership, communication, and work relations and processes, which inform this study. That is, within the organisational context, organisational cultural agents impact the learning process at the individual, team and organisational levels.

Leadership, communication, and work processes and relations are significant factors shaping individual learning within an organisation (Stephenson, 2004). These organisational cultural agents impact the process of individual learning within an organisation, and of consequence I present an organisational cultural model as a framework for understanding how individuals learn in an organisation (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1** (Stephenson, 2004)
The Study

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven formerly separate Emirates that united in 1971 under the visionary leadership of the late Sheikh Zayed. Abu Dhabi is the capital and the richest emirate due to extensive oil reserves. Dubai is the most well known emirate and city and is a rapidly-developing international hub of travel, tourism and commerce. The local population are known as Emiratis and comprise approximately one million. A further one and a half million expatriate workers are resident in the country. The UAE is a sheikhocracy where power and decision-making is held by elite families with extensive resources and wealth. Although the Emirates are governed by a federal council, each emirate has its own ruler and unique political subsystem formed by complex tribal and family relationships.

In 1962 when oil was discovered in the UAE the country was very underdeveloped with little infrastructure to support development. There were only 20 schools for fewer than 4000 pupils at that time. Forty three years later there are now 755 government schools from K-12, and another 470 private schools, catering for both expatriate and national students.

Although higher education in the UAE was in its infancy stage, the country’s youth have access to higher education at three government supported, gender segregated colleges and universities with numerous campuses. There are also private institutions throughout the country. The first university, established in 1977 had a student population of 15 000 in 2000. In 1988, the first of eleven vocational colleges was established. In 2000, they had a total enrolment of over 13 000 students. Both of these institutions ran parallel programs for female and male students.

The university in this study was a good example of the country’s leaders’ commitment to education for women. It was established in 1998 to provide quality higher education for national women in order to prepare them for professional and leadership roles. The University’s enrolment was approximately 2 500 full time students. About 1500 of those students were in the baccalaureate program whilst the remainder studied in the English language program, preparatory to entering the baccalaureate program.

The University’s vision was to graduate students who “envision the possibilities and create the opportunities that shape the future of [the country].” Initially I was sceptical that women would be allowed to assume roles in the UAE as professional, community and national leaders. However, during my time at the University I found our female students were not only welcome candidates for important positions but they were being eagerly recruited for their educational preparation and leadership potential.

During the three year period of the study I identified different levels of learning within a university setting and developed a model of individual learning at three organisational levels: individual learning within a department (micro level), individual learning as a member of a departmental group in the Department (meso level) and individual learning as a member of a cross departmental work group at the University level (macro level). Leadership, communication, and work processes and relations, interact with an individual’s internal framework at each level and all three levels of learning are important and entwined (Stephenson, 2004).

As a woman and researcher, appointed as a faculty member, my learning was contextualised and in relation to significant others: students, other teachers, Supervisors, University professors, community people and other administrators. At various times figures were in the foreground and
background, emerging from the lived present and past. Such lived experiences challenged my professional and academic identity as I was shaped by my work as well as shaping my work. In addition, it raised questions about this dialogic understanding, my expertise and the nature of individuality. The study represented my journey into the practical world of learning to become a member of this University. It was my attempt to critically narrate some of the tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas that influence organisational life and learning.

I was concerned with demonstrating that autoethnography is an appropriate way to understand how individuals learn in organisations, in particular how leadership, communication, and work processes and relations can either hinder or enable this to happen.

The following questions framed my investigation and guided my thinking throughout the learning process:

1. How do different organisational levels shape individual learning?
2. What is the impact of organisational cultural agents on individual learning?

As I developed my model, using reflexive thinking, the following additional sub-questions guided my thoughts, analysis and interpretations:

i. What forms of individual learning take place at this University?
ii. How does leadership affect learning?
iii. How does communication affect learning?
iv. How do work processes and relations affect learning? What is the nature of work processes – teams, individuals, loosely coupled?

**Significance of the Study**

This research holds important implications for theory as well as practice. Although organisational and educational research has focused on organisational cultures, the influence of organisational culture on individual organisational learning is under appreciated (Mahler, 1997). Further, and more importantly, little attention has been paid to the affects of organisational cultural agents on individual and collective learning using social learning and socialisation theories and emotionality in the workplace. Instead, many studies focus on the cognitive aspects of individual learning. However, neither cognitive nor social theories entirely explain my interest in the way an individual makes meaning of and creates her social world.

The cultural impact may be described in this way. As an individual interacts with a specific workplace, organisational cultural agents interact that enable individuals to learn about and create the world around them. For me, becoming a member of an organisation meant learning through a socialisation process; that is learning what to do and learning how to be through interactions with others. Thus, learning to become a member of an organisation includes the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills, social rules and behaviour (Stephenson, 2004). The study’s approach was grounded in the idea that knowledge and learning can be understood as both cognitive and social activities. That is, learning occurs within the evolving relationships of individuals and groups within their work contexts.

My adaptation of social learning theories expands the idea that learning is embedded only in the cognitive worlds of individuals (Richter, 1998). Instead, it recognises that university life is socially and culturally structured; it is constantly changing through the learning that occurs in everyday activities and lived experiences amongst and through university members. Thus, as
learning occurs in communities, through social practice and situated lived experience, it leads to social formation (Lemke, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) where leadership, communication, work processes and relations, and subjectivity are key elements in the learning process.

Second, few studies have focused on institutions of higher education and no other study that I am aware of, has used an autoethnographic approach to focus on individual learning at micro, meso and macro levels within a university setting in the Arabian Gulf.

The project also holds importance in helping administrators and university members identify the organisational cultural agents and learning strategies within their own institutions of higher education. As a result, I believe strategies for building more effective learning environments can be determined by focusing on the impact of key agents on individual learning (Stephenson, 2004).

The third, and most important contribution is not in the findings of the project so much as in the methodology I have developed. Having reviewed methods used by researchers in sociology, cultural anthropology, education, organisational development and the learning organisation, I adapted autoethnographic methods (Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 1995a; 1995b; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to develop a reflexive, autoethnographic case study methodology.

Autoethnography

Within the field of qualitative research, autoethnography is becoming more widely known as a useful and appropriate approach. Autoethnography is composed from within a simultaneously personal and social space, a blending of autobiography and ethnography (Bochner, 1996; Bochner & Ellis, 1999, 2002; Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Ellingson, 2001). It varies from traditional ethnographic methods because the writer is no longer an objective outsider in the texts. Advocates of autoethnographic methods argue that to understand others one should understand the self (Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 1997; Smith, 1998).

The term autoethnography was first used by David Hayano (1979, cited in Ellis and Bochner, 2000). He used the term to refer to anthropologists involved in research of their own people, where the researcher is a complete insider within the group being studied. However, I use the term to mean a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997) such as Zayed University. According to Crawford (1996:158):

\[\text{Ethnography, ... becomes autoethnographic because the ethnographer is unavoidably in the ethnography one way or another, manifest in the text, however subtly or obviously (Crawford,1996: 158).}\]

Gans (1999) claims that much postmodern ethnography, particularly autoethnography has been preoccupied with the self, which is a product of an asocial theory of knowledge. For Gans (1999):

\[\text{This kind of ethnography has nothing to do with analysing what people do with and to each other in their groups...or how institutions and communities function and malfunction (Gans, 1999:541).}\]

However, I disagree with Gans’ claim because given that the self is a social phenomenon, an individual learns to understand others by reflecting on the self, in social action with others. Thus
a person learns how they are defined by the world, and how to redefine themselves and their relationships with others through reflection on what people do with and to each other.

A valuable use of autoethnography is to allow others’ experiences to inspire critical self reflection (Sparkes, 2002a:221). For Gough (1999), autoethnography seeks to reveal one’s experience to oneself and to understand the self and the environment of the self rather than to generalise. In contrast to Gans’ (1999) and Gough’s (1999) views, I join Church (1995) and many others (Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Crawford, 1996; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Richardson, 1999; Sparkes, 2002a) in their belief that good autoethnographic research speaks beyond itself.

Given that autoethnographic methods promote analysis of the self through lived experiences in context, as a result it is possible to learn about the general from the particular (Church, 1995:5). It can help readers understand the way concrete details of a specific life convey a general way of life (Bochner, 1996; Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a). Thus, this methodology is an appropriate way to understand how individuals learn in organisations.

Autoethnography (re)positions the researcher as a project of inquiry who depicts a site of interest in terms of personal awareness and experience; it utilises the self consciousness … to reveal subjectively and imaginatively a particular social setting in the expressions of locally grounded impressions (Crawford, 1996:166).

Furthermore, drawing on Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning, I argue that this alternative, emerging version of ethnography is “engagement in relationships” with the self and others (Ellis, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a). Networking and connecting with others occurs when individuals socially interact for their own interests. According to Smith (1998), it is important to map those connections in order to understand the social context. Autoethnography encourages this mapping using lived experiences and narratives of self (Ellis, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a, 2002b).

Autoethnography describes studies that connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) which in turn connect our experiences with those we study (Ellis, 1995a; 1995b). Autoethnographic research describes, narrates and interprets personal experience while unobtrusively attempting to attend to the lives and cultures of others, minimising the presumptions of traditional ethnography (Crawford, 1996). According to Bochner and Ellis (1999), autoethnography is a product of both interaction and observation. It is bound to the embodied experiences and participation of the investigating self. Moving beyond the boundaries of traditional ethnography, autoethnography acknowledges ambiguity and complexity of meanings, understanding and social criticism, language as a constitutive quality of reality, local stories, situated meanings and writing stories from the position of a feeling, vulnerable observer (Bochner & Ellis, 1999).

Unlike traditional ethnographic methods, the experiences of the ethnographer are written into the text in an autobiographical style (Denzin, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sparkes, 2002b). Autoethnographic researchers believe in sharing things that are private and unique to the self based on personal experiences (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992 in Rhedding-Jones, 1996; Sparkes, 2002a, 2002b). Given that one of the functions of post structural research is to challenge single-minded values and authoritarianism (Rhedding-Jones, 1996), autoethnography seeks changes to academic discourses (Ellis, 1997, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a, 2002b). Therefore, autoethnographic approaches encourage alternative forms of writing, which include short story.
novel, dramatic dialogue, personal monologue, personal essay, poetry and memoir. I have incorporated some of these genres into this paper.

As Richardson (1999) observes, narratives about the contexts in which ethnography is produced are about our workplaces, disciplines, friends, family and self. For Krieger (1991, cited in Ellis, 1995a), this includes our own personalities, histories and relationships in the field, as much as our field research. The self sees life from a different point of view at different points in life (Geertz, 1995; Onley, 1980 in Smith, 1998), and the act of writing leads to self reflection, action and more reflection that may change the self and possibly the life (Gusdorf, 1980 in Smith, 1998). I too, used reflexive thinking and writing to understand the effects of the researcher.

Narrativists believe that humans live out stories, are told stories and are story-telling beings. A goal of new forms of narrative inquiry is to explore the way in which people understand who they are and how they come to know and learn (Willis, 1998). Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience that allows the complexities, challenges and ambiguities of our individual and organisational life experiences to be linked to experiential inquiry. One form of narrative inquiry is the “narrative of the self.” This type of writing is usually a revealing and highly personalised text in which the author invites the readers to relive experience and events with the writer (Richardson, 2000; Sparke, 2002a). As Crawford (1996) suggests, this approach allowed me to frame my awareness to include some narrative account of myself. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), the reader should feel and think with the story and learn about their own lives in relation to other’s experiences. In contrast to traditional ethnography texts, narratives of self tell specific stories of specific events but draw on writing techniques of fiction. Using “imaginative renderings” such as exaggeration, these subjective texts largely remove the challenge of speaking for “the other” because the researchers are in fact “the other” in the text (Richardson, 1999:356).

Geertz’ (1995) emphasises the importance of the presence of the narrator in the story when the anthropologist studies a changing, uncertain world. Similarly to Geertz, Bateson (1994) advocates using a narrative form of inquiry in anthropology. According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000) it is narrative that allows Bateson as an anthropologist to learn. In fact, narrative allows all of us to individually and collectively learn. Smith (1998) argues that the sequence of events that one lives in a culture results in the kind of person they become and their outlook on life. Thus, drawing on life writing, this University’s culture and its influences on individual learning can be captured through studying the self in the University community (Smith, 1998).

The autoethnographic approach I used has the following characteristics: it is grounded in reality through personal experience; grounded within a specific social context; subjective; longitudinal; multi dimensional; reflexive; and it combines methodologies of narrative inquiry and personal experience methods (narratives of self). I draw on case study (one university is studied), critical ethnography (culture is an important construct) and autoethnography (strategies including reflexive ethnography, personal experience methods and narratives of the self).

**Strengths of an autoethnographic approach**

In keeping with the holistic nature of the study, I drew on autoethnography as a way of making sense of the University’s organisational life. My choice of autoethnographic case study enabled me to focus on knowledge and learning that would not have been produced through traditional positivist research. In addition, it gave a voice to the difficulties, risks and ambiguities of organisational life in this Middle Eastern University (Stephenson, 2004). I treated the research as an opportunity to learn from myself and from everyday life in the University. The research itself
also helped me learn in my professional practice and as such included aspects of action research methodology (see Willis, 1998).

Given the study’s interest in the way organisational cultural agents influence individual learning over time, it draws on past experience and the need to “surpass our histories” through critical reflection and interpretation of the present and future (Gough, 1999). Just as anthropologists such as Geertz and Bateson are concerned with how life is experienced over time, so too are narrativists (see Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1997). Just as our context dependent experiences change over time, so too does a university’s culture. Narrative inquiry and autobiographical methods attend to the continuum of university life experiences.

The study combined the personal with the cultural and compared lived experiences with established knowledge in order to understand individual learning and the impact of organisational cultural agents at different levels within a particular university context. My autoethnographical field texts allowed me to acquire a contextualised understanding of my own perceptions and those of two critical friends. I could ascertain a variety of unanticipated yet meaningful characteristics of the environment as I lived and worked within the community of the study (Stephenson, 2004). I explored, reinterpreted and reshaped my research both prior to and during the action (Husen, 1997) by focusing outward on social and cultural aspects, and inward exposing a self that can move through, change and possibly resist cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnographies allow readers to exercise their imaginations when they have never been exposed directly to certain situations. For instance, individuals have been through similar circumstances in their lives; they may be able to identify with my experiences and learn through my analysis. Autoethnographies thus are means of understanding ourselves better.

As a woman and a teacher, my inquiry into the effects of organisational cultural agents on individual learning included the personal story of my professional learning experiences. It incorporated poststructural methodologies by mixing the researcher with the researched; reflecting our own lives and backgrounds; being personal; stretching the boundaries of what research is; transcending disciplinary boundaries; letting the unplanned happen, allowing the field texts to speak for themselves, including various aspects of action research and autobiography (Rhedding-Jones, 1996; Smith 1998). This autoethnographic case study:

orchestrates fragments of awareness – appreended/projected and recalled/reconstructed – into narratives and alternative text forms which (re) present events and other social actors as they are evoked from a changeable and contestable self (Crawford, 1996:166).

The study focused on those life experiences that shape and change the meanings people gave to themselves and their life projects (Denzin, 1997). It was an autoethnography that used my own experiences in the university’s culture reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As Richardson (1992) states in Ellis (1995a), this reflexivity can help shape “better” ethnographies and better lives for ourselves and those who teach us about their lives.

The reflexive nature of the cycle of action and reflection enabled me as researcher to move from an unreflexively subjective position to one of critical subjectivity (Reason,1998). The field texts generated are concerned with reflexivity and consciousness in the midst of action (Reason,1998). An example of this includes the examination of my individual practices through keeping detailed field texts based on organisational experiences, behaviours and interpretations. To avoid criticisms of “self absorption”, these field texts then became the subject for mutual reflection and
analysis by critical friends. I compared and contrasted my perceptions as researcher with two critical friends, who shared similar positions within the department. My perceptions were then interwoven with the reflections of the two critical friends.

Ellis (1997) poses questions that encourage individuals to reflect on the way academics and others regard scholarship. She asks people to question what scholarship does, how it is used, how people feel when they read it and what meaning it gives to their lives as academics, thus, emphasising the need for a paradigm shift in scholarship and learning discourses.

Some autoethnographies depict events in a powerful way through extremely personal accounts that are painful to read; for example Lisa Tillman Healy’s account of her ongoing fight with bulimia or Aliza Kolker's battle with cancer both cited in Bochner and Ellis (1999). These accounts generate a kind of understanding that traditional research reports cannot.

Another reason why my autoethnographic approach is preferable to traditional methods is that studying informal learning can be problematic for researchers. Implicit learning can be difficult to detect without prolonged observation. Recollection of reactive learning and deliberate learning can also be difficult to observe unless there is an unusually dramatic outcome (Ereraut, 2000). Similarly, the study of felt emotions is difficult to get at. This adapted autoethnographic methodology captured my feelings as well as the expression of those feelings.

Autoethnographic methodology provided the conceptual scaffolding to be able to study my learning journey. The study benefited more from the application of autoethnographic methodology than it would have from the use of a traditional methodology such as surveys. For example, I was able to gather greater insights and more effectively explore the socialisation process and the quality of University life because autoethnographic methods are grounded in reality, thus revealing more about the phenomenon. This research methodology demonstrated that practices in institutions of higher education are grounded in the context in which they operate. It also acknowledges that ethnography is “engagement in relationships” with the self and that autoethnographic living and writing is essentially reporting personal experiences (Stephenson, 2004).

The major contribution of the study was the adaptation of the methodology and the ways in which I have used the field texts to address my research questions from an autoethnographic perspective. The research text was created reflexively and used creative analytical practices to invite interpretive responses that may generate in the reader new questions and/or a move to action. It embodied a sense of lived experience – a credible account of a cultural, social and individual sense of the real (Richardson,1999, Richardson & Lockridge, 1998). The study was useful because it not only enabled me to learn about myself, my relationships and the University and society in which I lived and worked; but also enabled others to learn from these lived experiences as they used them to reflect on their own lived experiences (Richardson & Lockridge, 1998). The educational importance of this autoethnographic case study is that it used theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to address the educational experience lived (Stephenson, 2004).

Although the strengths as indicated are evident, there are challenges when studying informal and implicit teacher learning using an autoethnographic approach. Drawing on Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) conversation model in Denzin and Lincoln (2000), this section takes the form of a conversation between Mary, a colleague, and me. It occurred in my office late one Wednesday afternoon (the equivalent of a Friday afternoon in the West) when both of us were tired from an intensive week at work.

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I was on leave to write my thesis but continued to come into the office to write. It just made more sense as I had access to the databases, the library, and a desktop rather than the pokey keyboard of my lap top (my carpal tunnel syndrome was back again with a vengeance). Mary had been helping me with some initial editing of my work and as a result of her reading each chapter we ended up engaged in some interesting conversations about the nature of individual learning at different levels of the University.

“Let’s review your original model again,” Mary suggested.

“Sure. My model (see Figure 1) depicts the different phases of individual learning at varying organisational levels and the way organisational cultural agents influence this learning (Stephenson, 2004). While linear in presentation, the model is not linear in implementation. Individual learning is often complex and messy. It takes place over time and as individuals learn and unlearn. The model represents individuals interacting at a variety of levels within a university context: at the individual level within a department, at the team level within a departmental team and, at the organisational level within cross departmental teams. These three phases move individuals from only interacting with a department, to interacting with a departmental team, to interacting with groups of people from various departments across the University. At each level the individual is required to interact with increasingly diverse groups and subsystems within the University.

My theory is that individual learning and unlearning is a complex and dynamic process that occurs simultaneously at all levels of the organisation. The three organisational cultural agents: leadership, communication, and work processes and relations determine the final model of individual learning in an organisation and individual learning depends on the specific social context. Organisational cultural agents simultaneously influence each other and at the same time shape learning at the three organisational levels. The model proposes that individual learning occurs as a result of negative and positive experiences and that interdependent organisational cultural agents influence individual meaning making and learning at a variety of levels.

I’ve learned so many things about my model. I learned about the importance of effective leadership and the need for a shared vision, communication of that vision, consensus building, rewards and recognition. Effective communication, especially informal communication, is also essential to facilitate the development of work relations, which influence so much of an individual’s feeling about work life (Hamper, 1986). Teamwork, for example, is critical in its contributions to individual and collective learning. All of these things are interconnected; in order for learning to occur individuals need to understand the larger levels, the systems (Stephenson, 2004). Through an autoethnographic approach and my non linear model of individual learning in an organisation I learned that individual learning doesn’t have fixed stages– it’s an interconnected web of complexities…”

“So what were the outcomes of the model?” Mary asked.

“The fact that the University was an all women’s university in a society where men appeared to dominate impacted my learning and becoming identities as a woman, a professional and an academic. There were so many complex forces that pulled me in different directions. My learning was situated in my relationships with others and my present conditions were contingent upon past discourses. As I learned I was able to reconstruct my identity embracing displacement as part of my emerging identity.

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Throughout my learning journey I struggled with departmental structure, its practices, and its discourses of control and power. As a teacher I depended on a professional network of supportive colleagues to learn and practice my chosen profession. I only partially had this in the Department through the small group of critical friends and colleagues. This was particularly painful for me as I found myself constructing an identity that was based upon not fitting into the roles expected of me and at the same time challenging my previous concepts of self and identity.

Initially my context was qualified by isolation, lack of critical dialogue and practices with a variety of people from within the Department and across the University. As my context expanded at the organisational level, my network became more multi-disciplinary. It was at this level that I was able to engage in dialogue and shared practices in order to work things through. My engendered professional and academic identities struggled with the constant antagonism of the positioning of multiple identities. As such, my journey was one from the privatisation of self-doubt and self-blame to becoming an effective member of the University as a woman, a teacher and a researcher (Stephenson, 2004).

As I journeyed through the three phases of my learning, I learned that the organisation’s history, location and its place in the local culture shaped my developing identity and the identities of staff and students (Stephenson, 2004).

Examples of this include the fact that men dominated the leadership team that founded the University and yet as an all female University there was an expectation that women would be placed in leadership positions. However, those women that were hired into leadership positions had a “Mother hen type” leadership style that appeared to alienate the majority of men and women who did not fit the nurturing female stereotype. Several community members were surprised that men could even teach at this all female University.

The University’s By-Laws were borrowed from another local institution and local traditions dominated the organisational structures. It was not considered appropriate to make salary scales and criteria for faculty promotion transparent. The local reliance on external consultants meant that there appeared to be an underlying lack of trust of University employees.

The local students and their parents were used to negotiating conditions and hence agreed rules were often broken in the early days due to parental and student pressure. Furthermore, the students did not have a maturity to enable them to complete evaluations responsibly and many teachers felt threatened by the inappropriate use of teaching evaluations and the pressure to increase grades. Many faculty felt that the students judged the female teachers more harshly than the males and that the male teachers “had it easier because they were able to act differently.”

These contextual constraints constantly impacted my developing identity to the point that I started to almost take some of the practices as the norm (Stephenson, 2004). More importantly though, on this dialogic journey, I learned that a context which supports social participation is critical if individual learning and a learning culture are to develop (Senge, 1990a; Wenger, 1998). Although all the three organisational cultural agents influenced my learning, looking back at the self narratives I was able to identify the major influences in each phase. In the first phase leadership impacted heavily. Work processes and work relations largely influenced my individual learning in the second phase. However, the third phase was more complex and organisational cultural agents interacted to a greater extent. As a result, all three organisational cultural agents played a significant role with leadership influencing my learning the most. Cross
departmental work processes and communication also significantly shaped my individual learning in that phase (Stephenson, 2004).

Negative forces working in the first phase thwarted my learning and the learning of the critical friends. My limited individual learning is largely as a result of authoritarian leadership styles, ineffective communication and individualisation of work processes. At the micro level leadership impacted heavily. The hierarchical nature of the Department, its focus on authoritarian leadership styles to control faculty with little if any attention to affective factors meant that I felt threatened, anxious, disempowered and isolated (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987). As a result of the fragmentation and disorder that occurred at the departmental level, my sense of my professional and academic identities was continually challenged which led to my becoming very emotional in this phase. I had come from a responsible position in Australia, however, in this University my professional identity seemed to count for very little and everything seemed out of control and out of my control. As a result, there was a constant antagonism between management and faculty. I felt undervalued and the perceived lack of autonomy and professional respect led to me feeling lost as I continued to question my own identity (Stephenson, 2004).

Issues with the departmental leadership also influenced work processes, relations and communication. Individualised work processes meant that camaraderie did not easily develop at work and as such informal shared experiences were reduced.

Work processes and work relations largely influenced my individual learning in the second phase. Because the departmental culture had developed into one characterised by negative elements, work relationships became the key to getting through each day. Through these work relationships I experienced the majority of my learning in the form of teamwork and team learning (Stephenson, 2004).

In the team I started to feel happier because of the emotional sharing and bonding with individuals, and team goals and values. Whilst my emotions were still strong I felt safer in the team and as a result I began to periodically mobilise and reengage in action. In the safety of the team, I was able to cope with the stressful nature of the departmental climate and the negative impact of leadership and ineffective formal communication. The reasons for this included the fact that we were able to share emotions openly which helped maintain the relationships, created a sense of solidarity and supported an alternative environment for risk taking, in stark contrast to the wider Department context which I viewed as hostile and therefore personally distressing to be in. That is, while going about our teaching assignments and focussing on our shared goal of developing the curriculum and improving the student learning experience, we also engaged in emotional teamwork (Sandelands & Boudens, 2000). As was the case in the first phase, once again, I learned that a context that supports social participation facilitates individual learning (Senge, 1990a; Wenger, 1998).

In the first two years organisational cultural agents negatively impacted my learning at the organisational level. Some of these factors were poor communication, ineffective leadership styles, control and authoritarian decision-making. However, in the third year through experiencing transformational, servant and distributed leadership and, my on going involvement and work relations with faculty other than those in the Department, I experienced the majority of my learning in the form of teamwork and team learning. Although all three organisational cultural agents shaped my learning at this level, leadership, collaborative cross departmental work processes and effective communication impacted my learning significantly.
Through observation and mentoring by role models with distributed leadership styles, my capacity to take responsibility for my own development as a leader was facilitated. At the organisational level, the University leadership implemented Watkins and Marsick’s (1999) strategic leadership for learning through their action imperatives of creating continuous learning opportunities, promoting inquiry and dialogue, encouraging collaboration and team learning, creating systems to capture and share learning, and empowering people toward a collective vision. I was able to work more effectively at this level because I understood and had control over my work and as a result I really enjoyed what I was doing (Stephenson, 2004).

Following Watkins and Marsick (1999), as I joined others from different areas of the University, I learned in teams, networks, and increasingly larger units. Because I no longer felt the performance anxiety I did at the departmental level, I was engaged in collective work processes with groups of individuals who shared a common purpose. We were involved with what we were doing and shared emotion and successes. As a result we developed a sense of community, which in turn created a culture of individual and collective learning. For the first time, I saw myself as part of an organisational “we”. We had purpose, focus, commitment, passion, trust, respect and choice. Furthermore, we were all involved, protected each other, shared emotion and successes, and went beyond the call of duty many times and all felt personally responsible for success.

“...So what were the challenges for you when studying your own learning?” Mary asked.

“Well, I was challenged to ensure that I was incorporating multiple perspectives. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000:740), authors use their lived experiences reflexively “to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions.” A challenge was to show how my personal experiences illustrated the quality of University life under study. In fact the very act of engaging with the social world meant that I was automatically including more than my own subjective experiences (Stephenson, 2004).

Another significant hurdle is that this methodology challenged traditional research methods and for many my autoethnographic method may not be acceptable. Still, this perception is changing. I mean, just the other day another book came in from the British Library, “Ethnographically Speaking” (Bochner & Ellis (eds.), 2002), full of examples of autoethnographic research. Interestingly, this volume focuses on literature and aesthetics and the majority of the contributors come from the fields of sociology and anthropology. I think there is a real opportunity to use autoethnographic methods in other fields such as education and to understand emotions in organisations. I believe we will see more autoethnographic methodologies used in the near future.”

“Do you think you will have difficulty in having this methodology accepted by those in your discipline?” Mary grilled.

“Quite possibly. Yes. I remember like it was yesterday explaining to a colleague, well, trying to explain what I intended to do about five years ago. At that time it was very difficult for me to get my head around the idea of what it meant to be doing autoethnographic research. I knew I was fascinated by it and I wanted to try it. I guess what appealed to me the most was that it had the potential to make research accessible to more people than just a select few scholars and academics. Anyway, I tried to explain that I would be reflecting on my individual learning experiences over time in a variety of contexts, identifying themes and continuities, analysing and interpreting them and capturing them in different genres. I talked animatedly about the different genres I could use. I was very excited by the prospect of capturing learning and the cultural elements that impact learning through the writing process. But when I finished he was silent and
remained silent. I looked at him and asked, “Well, what do you think?” His reply was, “It sounds completely narcissistic to me.” I was dumbfounded. I had not thought of it in that way at all. It was only later that I came across the idea that autoethnographic methodologies were criticised for being self indulgent (Coffey, 1999: 155).

Those that produce autoethnographies are acutely aware of this hostile atmosphere and universal charge of self indulgence that is often levelled against them (Sparkes, 2002a: 214).”

“Does the charge of narcissism (Coffey, 1999) detract from the validity and generalisability of autoethnography as a research tool?” Mary asked.

“Well, in order to address the charge of narcissism, I incorporated strategies suggested throughout the literature for achieving credibility (Sturman, 1997; Sparkes, 2002a) and authenticity (Ellis, 1999).

I agree with Sparkes (2002a: 222) that autoethnographic approaches extend beyond the self by contributing to research as experience in ways that are self-knowing and self respectful. He has a valid point when he says that our academic backgrounds, professional socialisation patterns and career structures make it difficult to embrace research traditions different from our own. And yet, the critical learning that diversity offers us is present in autoethnographical writings. I think it is only a matter of time before their value is acknowledged in a variety of disciplines.

The validity and generalisability of autoethnographic methodologies have also been questioned. However, as Ellis (1999) claims, I believe that because autoethnographies aim for verisimilitude, they are valid. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 751) state validity means that our work seeks “to evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible.” In addition, validity can be judged by whether it helps readers communicate with others or offers ways to improve lives. I agree with Ellis (1999:674) when she states that an autoethnography’s generalisability is tested by readers as they question whether the text speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know.

The autoethnographic methodology used supported and sustained the learning journey. Thus, autoethnography is not only a methodology; it also provides the conceptual scaffolding to be able to study an individual learning journey (Stephenson, 2004). That is, the postmodern self must be a reflexive individual (Bochner, 1994, 1996; Bochner & Ellis, 1999, 2002; Ellis, 1991, 1999). Gergen (1997:7) states in postmodern times people “exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction.” He claims the self is not a unified whole, but rather constantly borrows from available sources to construct an identity. As you know, in order to further address criticisms by some of bias and preconceived notions affecting the final research text, I used reflexive thinking to understand the effects of the researcher. Because I knew that much of what I saw was the result of my own presence, I reflexively came to terms with it (Holliday, 2001). Like Ellis (1997) and Ronai (1998; 1999), I experienced complementary and contradictory fragments of my own identity throughout the study. At times, I had difficulty knowing when my current perspective potentially clouded my memory of the past. However, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), events in the past are always interrupted from the current position. From day-to-day, one significant event to another, one narrative fragment draft to another, as a result of my individual learning I constructed and reconstructed the self. Rather than arriving at one truth, reflexive thinking through multiple perspectives helped me make meaning of my experiences and individual learning. My chosen methodology conceptually supported me throughout the three year learning process (Stephenson, 2004).”

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“Another challenge was in relation to the restrictive context and culture, right? I mean you had to be extremely careful.” Mary said.

“Yes, I had to be. I had to remain consciously aware of the ethical issues including the need for anonymity.”

What are the implications for future research?” Mary asked.

“There are many areas where autoethnographic approaches would enhance research. It has real possibilities in the way it allows individuals to focus on the situational complexities and challenges of their social worlds. The methodology supports individual team and organisational learning. Key areas for future application of this approach might include educational leadership and management; emotionality in organisations; change management; university and school cultures and learning, curriculum renewal and reform, teacher education and professional development, teamwork, team learning, and communities of practice. Autoethnography is also an excellent tool in teaching, learning and assessment and the scholarship of teaching.

For example, today’s leaders must be reflective practitioners who are able to deal with dilemmas. They must be true leaders of learning who model and understand the needs of organisational members as learners. Autoethnography is the obvious research method to explore the self in one’s social context. Leaders may experience events that they don’t consciously know they are experiencing. Autoethnographic research would enable them to capture their thoughts and feelings through the writing process in a variety of genres. The same could be said for management teams. Similarly, team members can increase their own learning and that of the team by beginning to understand other team members through self introspection and developing an understanding of themselves (Stephenson, 2004).

Autoethnography seeks to reveal an individual’s experience, and yet it also provides many opportunities to share stories and experiences through discussion circles, participatory interviews and other means of self and group reflection. Thus, research into team development, communities of practice, team leadership, decision making, team roles and team learning can be explored through multiple perspectives, capturing the complexities of the context. Through the process of developing collective stories (Richardson, 2000) and learning histories (Kleiner & Roth, 1997), individuals with similar experiences bond together.”

Conclusion

The project discussed in this paper was concerned with demonstrating that autoethnography is an appropriate way to understand how individuals learn in organisations, in particular how leadership, communication, and work processes and relations, can either hinder or enable this to happen. In line with autoethnographic principles, the research problem emerged and evolved through data collection, reflection, talking to others and developing a model of individual learning in an organisation. Organisational cultural agents influence individual, team and organisational learning because they play a significant part in an individual’s learning to become a member of an organisation at those levels. Organisational and cultural forces such as leadership, communication, and work processes and work relations shape individual learning and negative forces can work at different organisational levels to thwart learning within an organisation.
In my study of individual learning, the use of autoethnographic methodology led to a greater understanding of informal learning over a three-year period within a University setting. Foucault states:

...knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently that one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all (Foucault, 1987:8).

Autoethnographic methodology is an appropriate way to understand, analyse and interpret how individuals learn in an organization because it is comprehensive, complex, holistic and three-dimensional. It enables the integration of complex issues to capture the intense activity of lived experiences and emotions in organisational life (Fineman, 2000). Rather than a linear process, an autoethnographic approach captures the fragmented, web like nature of individual learning and the quality of life. For Fineman (2000:13), such methodology places emotion in its wider structural and cultural contexts and addresses “the dynamism of the subject matter, where the researcher’s emotions cannot simply be factored out.”

This paper advocates the power of autoethnographic methods - the telling and writing of stories, which have transformative possibilities that enable a reconstruction of the self. I attempted to briefly illustrate this power by capturing part of my learning journey at different organisational levels using alternate academic discourse that challenges the traditional paradigm of densely referenced text and the use of the neutral researcher’s voice. Furthermore, I used creative forms of representation to reflect the idea that there is no single, correct way to have an experience or transmit knowledge of that experience (Lather, 1991).
References


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