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Auto/ethnography: a journey of self/indulgence

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Research aspires to be objective and purposeful, and keen to improve my own teaching, I began a phenomenographic exploration of lecturers' experiences teaching in multi-cultural classrooms. Disparities between the participants' perspectives and my expectations, however, found me caught between my purposefulness and my passion for the topic. Seeking a way forward I was drawn to explore my own assumptions about research and my role as the researcher. The emerging insights create a compelling, and at times shocking, account of my pervasive influence on this purportedly, objective research project. Searching for theoretical reflections of my experiences I discovered auto/ethnography. My initial delight turned into distaste at the degree of self disclosure I encountered in the writings. I rejected auto/ethnography as self indulgent and un-academic, yet as I wrote, I could not stem the flow of revelations about the centrality of my values and beliefs in this research project. This paper offers some thoughts on my research journey and concludes by reframing the pejorative 'self-indulgent' to assert that to give oneself up to contemplation of the diverse influences of the researcher's self on her research is enlightening and essential for ethical research….indeed self/indulgent.

Key words: research; auto/ethnography; reflexivity; higher education

Introduction

This research project arose from a teaching experience that went wrong. Each semester I work with students to develop a shared, class learning contract. In this particular semester I contributed to the list of objectives: 'To value our different cultural perspectives on the subject content'. Students included this in the learning contract and local and international students enthusiastically offered their differing cultural views on the various psychological theories studied in our first year subject 'Understanding Human Behaviour'. A mid-semester evaluation process to check if we were on track with our learning contract unexpectedly generated potent cultural tensions. Some students reported that they wanted more time spent on exam preparation while others wanted more discussion linking the theories to their own experiences. As we discussed the options I became aware of growing tensions in the class. In the following week deputations of local students came to my office asserting that their views were more important than those of the international students.

Dismayed at the antipathy of many local students towards the international students in the class I was motivated to learn about teaching in multicultural classrooms from more experienced lecturers. I chose an exploratory research approach, phenomenography, which utilised my skills as an interviewer and provided a structured framework for transcript analysis. I set up a triangulated data gathering process to maximise validity and engaged each participant in a pre-teaching interview, an observation of their teaching in one class and a post-teaching interview. The purpose of the second interview was to compare what they 'said' about their teaching with what they 'did' in the classroom. I

envisioned gathering the wisdom and knowledge of my participants into a 'How to…' manual of principles and strategies to guide other teachers who, like me, are searching for ways to value cultural differences in the classroom.

Scoping the discussion

This paper explores some of my reluctant, painful and exhilarating experiences of this research project. I say reluctant, because happily engaged in what I envisaged to be a purposeful and objective research process I simply wanted to get on and 'do' the research. Painful, because along the way I felt compelled to examine and then give up my 'safe' understandings about research and my role as a researcher and embrace a less predictable, more open and reflexive approach to my research. Exhilarating, as I am learning to acknowledge and value my role in the research process rather than try to control for or negate its influence.

It is a scary, bumpy and exciting ride as I explore being 'within' my research, rather than standing outside it and maintaining control 'over' it. I write in the present tense to emphasise that I am learning as I write these words. Each time I sit down at my computer to think about the research project my perspectives shift and change like the images in a kaleidoscope. What I tell you now about research project is not an accurate reproduction of the past, but rather images, reflections and impressions influenced by how I think and feel right now. Even as I re-read what I have just written I change the emphasis, re-order my thoughts and words. I seek to capture more meaningful ways of describing what I want to say, yet, in the process the ideas and images shift and change shape under my fingers. I write auto/ethnography with a slash between the two parts of the word because I continue to explore the balance between writing about 'self' and 'other'. The slash I use to separate 'self' and 'indulgence' infers something a bit different. It reminds me to keep a space between the two words because independently I see them as positive, but together they infer a pejorative.

As I write I converse with myself and, at times I stop, suddenly, as a new thought or feeling emerges to challenge me to see what I have just written differently. I ask you to consider this paper as part of an ongoing conversation which, try as I might to be consistent and clear, is sometimes a little hesitant or wobbly. I am far more used to writing in the past tense, in a detached, passive voice to infer academic authority, than in an active voice to keep me in the present, learning as I write.

The research project

I sit in my office reflecting on my experience of the first two sets of interview/observation/interview processes feeling puzzled and a bit unnerved by the participants' responses. I re-live the frustrations both participants expressed in response to some of my questions. I also sit with my own frustrations about the lack of understanding each showed of my research topic. I am mystified as to why there is such a mismatch between my expectations and my participants' responses, especially when I began with the two people I thought would be the most promising. Understandably, without a shared understanding of the research topic, the next two phases of the data gathering process proved fruitless in terms of my research objectives.

Confused and disappointed I wrestle with competing thoughts. One acknowledges that the participants cannot give me the information I want if they do not understand the topic. In this case I must concentrate on improving my interviewing skills. This poses an unexpected challenge to my self concept as an experienced and capable interviewer. My second thought is that they cannot be such 'great' teachers after all. I expected these experienced lecturers to burst forth with ideas and strategies, given firstly, one of the university's stated goals is to develop students' cultural awareness and secondly, the influx of international students to the campus creates wonderful opportunities to do so. I reject this thought as it does not match with what I know about these two lecturers' commitment to learning and teaching, yet what is happening is most perplexing. I also realise that if the participants do not recognise a role for lecturers in developing students' cultural awareness then I am unlikely to see this enacted in their teaching. I decide to focus on participants' understandings and experiences of teaching in multicultural classrooms and scrap the teaching observation and second interview.

My struggle to find common ground with subsequent participants continues except for two who recognise what I am asking and enthuse about the importance of encouraging cultural sensitivity among students. They, however, like me are just beginning to explore different ways of going about this and I elicit no new strategies to enhance my own teaching or to share with others. My vision of producing a 'How to' manual for other lecturers fades. Dispirited, I draw on my passion for the topic to motivate me to continue, however, along with renewed energy comes a surge of anger towards the participants. I think to myself, these are all experienced lecturers, committed to their students' learning and highly regarded by their students and peers for their teaching skills. I simply cannot believe that they do not recognise the opportunities that increasing numbers of international students in their classes create for developing students' cultural awareness.

Swallowing my irrational and unacceptable anger towards the participants I again focus on my interview approach. I am increasingly uncomfortable with the role of an 'investigator' in the interviews preferring to seek knowledge and advice as a fellow teacher. At times I feel like an 'inquisitor'. I ponder how I got myself into this role as my professional practice and teaching is built on principles of collaboration and partnership. I realise that I expected the interviews to develop as free flowing exchanges, as might occur between colleagues. The interview introductions begin informally but administering the Explanatory Statement and Consent Forms transforms a relaxed, collaborative atmosphere into structured formality of interviewer and respondent.

I decide that I need to offer something of my own experience if I want a more equal relationship. I hope my own story will provide a focus for the questions and encourage more open responses from my fellow teachers. I write a short outline, much like the one that introduces this paper, and instead of beginning with the set questions, I offer it to my next participant who prefers me to 'tell' her the story, rather than read it herself, and as I speak I sense a very different interview atmosphere. I feel more much relaxed and perhaps, in response, my colleague relaxes too. The questions flow more easily and the responses are more expansive and exploratory. It is a richer, deeper and more personal

interview. I am delighted. The next interview experience is similar. Yet, still, I have no answers to my research questions. I know this is not really true. I have answers, but they are not the answers I expected nor, more importantly, are they the answers I want. I want to enhance my own teaching practice and offer the skills and knowledge of my colleagues to other teachers interested in contributing to their students' cultural awareness. The way I look at it, the answers I have underline what my colleagues are not doing rather than what they are.

At crisis point I see three possible options. The first is to abandon the project as flawed. The second is to persist with the research aims and seek more participants, perhaps from different universities, different backgrounds…continuing until I find answers to my research questions. The third is to work with the data I already have. Despite a strong temptation to abandon the research a stronger, stubborn streak rejects the first option. The second option, also tempting, rekindles my passion for the topic, but I feel uneasy. I start to wonder if the principles and strategies I am seeking really exist. Where will I look? How many people will I interview? When will I stop? This option also implicitly states that the information provided by these experienced lecturers is not good enough. This seems illogical and is an unacceptable position for me to take. I cannot simply disregard or minimise their contributions to my research because I do not like what they say. Yet, if I choose the third option I will be writing about what these lecturers do not know about enhancing their students' cultural awareness.

Initially I had been delighted to find my passion for incorporating cultural awareness into teaching reflected in the university's policies. I now feel that by writing about colleagues who are not successfully implementing these policies I am, in essence, using my position and power as the researcher to blame them for this. I also feel that this would be a betrayal of their generous contributions to my research. The strength of my determination not to write what I perceive to be a negative project report takes me by surprise. In my mind' eye I hear myself asserting to my supervisors that I just *will not* write a piece critical of my participants, teachers, just like me. My obstinacy is not rational, as I know I can focus on the resources required to assist lecturers to achieve the university's goal, but it is a powerful, visceral response and I feel my stomach tightening and my jaw clench in defiance as I write these words.

Darkly pondering the ruinous state of my research I begin to scrutinize the decisions I made during each stage of the research process. The insights that begin to surface astonish me. Each time I sit down to write new perspectives emerge of the impact of my 'invisible' beliefs about what research is 'meant to be', how it 'should' be conducted and what sort of knowledge is 'acceptable' for a research project to produce. There are so many unseen, unconscious yet powerful judgements that guided my decisions. Discovering that I contribute to my own research 'problems' through the beliefs I bring with me to the research process shifts my focus away from the 'deficits' of the participants. I cannot express the enormous relief I feel physically as well as emotionally and cognitively. My anger towards the participants ebbs away as it sinks in that this research is not only about 'them', it is as much about 'me'. I am a powerful participant in

the research process not a passive, objective investigator. I feel so happy to be free of the awful feeling of 'me' and 'them'.

My light-heartedness is short lived as I am assailed by perplexing and painful questions. How could I have been so blind? I consider myself to be a reflective researcher, keeping a journal of my research experiences to guide my thinking and doing. Why has it taken so long for me to become aware of the pervasive influence of my values and beliefs on this project? New and disturbing insights take my involvement as the researcher from the periphery of my consciousness into the centre. But, I ask myself, so what? Of what value are these insights to the research project itself? I have these exciting and enlightening self reflections about my role as the researcher, but, the research questions I began with remain unanswered and I face the daunting and unhappy task of gritting my teeth and writing up 'the research'.

Auto/ethnographic perspectives offer me a way forward. Variously described as a research method, a way of writing and a philosophical concept auto/ethnography is seen to be 'a form of self narrative that places the self within a social context.' (Reed-Danahay 1997:9). Acknowledging and valuing the role of my 'self' in the research process helps me make some sense of my experiences. Taking an auto/ethnographic perspective enables me to explore the questions raised above by considering my self reflections within a broader socio-cultural context. I am able to incorporate what I am learning about my values and beliefs as a researcher with their impact on the project in an integrated and congruent way rather than separating discussions of 'self' from 'other' in the mode of traditional social science research. Finally, an auto/ethnographic approach affirms but also challenges me to articulate, honestly and openly my impact on the research process in a way that is positive and enabling rather than negative and disabling. I feel the jangling, clashing parts of my experience of the research project begin to come together as different reflections of a whole experience.

Auto/ethnography

Auto/ethnography is a term that has been in use for at least two decades and includes a wide range of research and writing approaches which connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis 2004; Ellis & Bochner 2000:739). Richardson says '[a]utoethnographies are highly personalised, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural.' (Richardson 2000:931). I think about the notion of culture in a broader context as my focus so far has been on culture as 'ethnicity'. I think about the way I respond to colleagues who ask about my research. I tell them that I am 'doing' research 'on' lecturers teaching in multi-cultural classrooms. I depict myself as the objective researcher, just as I might for example, in my past zoology research on invertebrates. In a flash I recognise myself as one of these lecturers, not an 'outsider', an objective researcher, but an 'insider', a member of the culture in which my research project exists. My understanding of the research shifts dramatically to encompass the new notion that my research is about 'us', not 'them'. This perspective turns my sense of the 'natural' order of social science research upside down and I feel as if I am losing control over my research. While my head is in panic mode, a gut feeling

emerges that this is congruent with my sense of 'self' and helps to explain why I feel so strongly about honouring the participants' contributions to my research. If I was one of the participants, I would want my contributions respected. Why did I not 'see' this before? Questions and insights like this compel me to continue exploring the beliefs underpinning this research project.

Poststructuralist theories offer support to auto/ethnography research approaches, firstly, by directing us to 'understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions as specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which we say everything at once to everyone' (Richardson 2000:929). Knowing that I am writing from a particular position at a particular time is both constraining and liberating. On one hand I must struggle against the powerful urge to proclaim my knowledge as 'expertise', while on the other, I no longer feel that I have to write the definitive piece about tertiary teaching in multi-cultural classrooms. In poststructural theories language is identified as a tool, not for reflecting social reality, but for creating it. Richardson (2000:929) further explains that '[l]anguage is how social organization and power are defined and contested and the place where our sense of selves, our *subjectivity,* is constructed.' As a woman living in a patriarchal society I understand that the language of power is far from neutral. Considering my research experiences, I turn my attention to the language of research and how I construct myself as a researcher. I scrutinise those words and terms I take for granted, that are so 'normalised' in my experience as to appear natural and neutral and begin to 'unpack' the meanings I attach to these words, terms, concepts examining how they inform my understandings of and approach to research practice.

Richardson (2000) informs me that the meanings we attach to concepts depend on the discourses available to us at the time. I have a science education and little time for 'alternative' explanations of anything. Yet while I value scientific knowledge, I rejected a career in psychology early in my professional life in favour of social work. I chose to work with the uncertainties of an holistic approach to understanding people's problems over the cause and effect explanations offered in my psychology studies. As a university lecturer I rejected the instructive role I had experienced as a science student preferring to take a facilitative approach using interactive and participatory learning and teaching strategies. And yet, I did not choose a collaborative approach to my research. Determined to produce objective knowledge that could be confidently passed on others through a 'How to…' manual, I chose a research methodology that offers a structured and rigorous approach to the analysis of interview data. I valued what I perceived to be greater objectivity of the research outcomes over my lived preference for the complexity and uniqueness of individual human experience. Richardson explains that '[b]ecause individuals are subject to multiple and competing discourses in many realms, their subjectivity is shifting and contradictory, not stable, fixed, rigid.' (Richardson 2000:929).

Social science research discourses dominated my education as a researcher and the concepts and language are so 'normal' as to be invisible to me. Ah, there is that word 'science' again and I did not even notice it. Or maybe I did, subconsciously, and sought the status it gives in a culture that values positivist knowledge. Through these discourses

I learned what I understand academic research to 'be' and what sort of knowledge it 'should' produce if it is to be accepted and valued. I also learned how to write academically and, as part of this model, to assert the 'expert' status of my knowledge.

Writing auto/ethnographically

Richardson (2000:924) astonishes me by confessing that she finds much qualitative research writing 'boring' to read. As I am not writing up this research or this paper for it to be judged as boring and left unread, I want to find to know more. Richardson explains that she, along with so many other qualitative researchers, was taught to not to write until she knew what she wanted to say and her points were organised. She asserts that this passive, organised, static writing model is more consistent with scientific, quantitative research writing and fails to recognise that writing is a creative, dynamic process. She adds that by using this model 'our sense of Self is diminished as we are homogenised through professional socialization, rewards and punishments.'(Richardson 2000:925). She explains that '[h]omongenization occurs through the suppression of individual voices and the acceptance of the omniscient voice of science as it if were our own.' (Richardson 2000:925). I

(Catching myself out)

Looking back over my paper so far I suddenly 'see' that I make a claim for authority and expertise by writing in the Abstract that self-reflection is 'essential for ethical research'. Smiling ruefully, my finger is poised above the delete key to 'edit' out my claim, to hide the contradiction between what I say and what I do. I resist the urge to censure because the statement reminds me of the power of dominant social science discourses over the ways I think about research and reminds me to stay alert. It also affirms that my 'knowing' is changing through the process of writing.

Writing auto/ethnographically changes the way I understand and use language in my thinking and writing, challenging me to reflect on the way I construct and represent ideas. Richardson (2000:923) considers 'writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic.' She asserts that 'writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project' but 'a way of "knowing"-a method of discovery and analysis.'(2000:923). Auto/ethnography writing 'displays the writing *process* and the writing *product* as deeply entwined; both are privileged' (Richardson 2000:930). Writing in an auto/ethnographic style usually means writing in the first person (Ellis and Bochner 2000:739) and in an evocative way that connects with our feelings, our bodies and our lived experience (Gannon 2006; Richardson 2000; Ellis & Bochner 2000).

I discover that choosing to write in an auto/ethnographic style is just the first step. Another powerful discourse emerges as I struggle to write reflexively. Petersen (2007) explores the power of academic socialisation on the act of academic writing. She describes the way we use the 'backspace' key on our computers and 'how it works in the processes of maintaining, policing or challenging operative constructions of legitimate academicity'. She relates an ordinary academic experience, editing as we write, to take out words, phrases that are 'too….' Petersen (2007:3) explains

> Whatever might have been 'too….' about that which prompted reflex edification it constituted something that the subject has come to recognise as, know as, feel as placed *outside* the boundary separating legitimate from illegitimate academic performativity. In that light the finger on the backspace button could signify that the subject has somehow caught herself in a zone on uninhabitability (Petersen 2007:3)

As a research student, desiring of academic recognition, I am 'working and policing at the boundaries of 'academic', and 'myself-as-this-particular-kind-of-academic-in-this-particular-context' (Petersen 2007:6). This is risky work as I am unsure where the boundaries lie and who will judge. Petersen (2007:7) adds '[i]n a dramatic sense the 'too..' poses a threat to the continuation of her social existence, her continued viability as an academic subject.' I look at what I have written so far and the 'feeling' words jump out at me. I wince, my finger poised over the delete key. Are they too emotive? Are they self indulgent and un-academic? If I am to be really honest I have already taken out stronger 'feeling' words replacing them with more 'acceptable' words. Still they leap out at me as unsuitable for an 'academic' paper yet they reflect my feelings as I re-live what I write. I leave the words alone, but realise, as I re-read, that I skip over them so as to resist the powerful urge to censure, yet again.

One of the goals of auto/ethnographic writing is to open 'spaces for thinking about the social that elude us now' (Richardson 2000: 930). Ellis & Bochner (2000:748) explain that '[t]he goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue.' They continue…..

> The stories we write put us into conversation with ourselves as well as our readers. In conversation with ourselves we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values. We take measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions and the multiple layers of our experience. Our accounts seek to express the complexities and difficulties of coping and feeling resolved, showing how we changed over time as we struggled to make sense of our experience. Often our accounts of ourselves are unflattering and imperfect, but human and believable. The text is used, then, as an agent of self understanding and ethical discussion. (Ellis & Bochner 2000:748)

Richardson asserts that '[w]riting from our Selves should strengthen the community of qualitative researchers and the individual voices within it, because we will be more fully present in our work, more honest and more engaged.' (2000:924). Accepting the challenge to be more honest and more present in my writing I examine the strength of feeling generated by the research project. I recognise that my desire for objectivity is partially a response to criticism, that I realise still troubles me, of an early research project judged as 'too personal and lacking objectivity'. For such an important project as a PhD I sought the objectivity I believed would come with added analytical rigour, sublimating my preference for a more richly nuanced exploration of experience.

My passion for the topic I now see as a double edged sword. It inspires and motivates me but leads me to make assumptions about what experience lecturers 'should' or 'must'

know about developing their students' cultural awareness. I now see my interview questions as 'loaded' with meaning and brimful of expectation that was unfathomable to most of the participants. Moreover it rendered me blind and deaf to what the participants said to me about their experiences of teaching in multicultural classrooms. My perplexed insistence that they 'must' have 'the' answers met their increasing frustration at my unwillingness to hear that they not only did not have the answers, but they did not agree with my starting point.

My unshakeable belief that there were 'truths' in the form of guiding principles and strategies to be 'found' and that all I had to do was find the 'experts' who could divulge them to me is anchored by multiple discourses that preference scientific positivist forms of knowledge. I did not consider that perhaps there were no 'truths' 'out there' to be 'found', and no 'experts' from who I could glean them. I saw myself as the 'learner' and the participants, my 'expert teachers'. I did not consider that my own experiences as a lecturer, teaching in multicultural classrooms, might be valuable. I felt my aggravation and disappointment was justified as they did not fulfil their roles as the 'expert' teachers I set them up to be. Ironically, as I re-read this paragraph, I see a parallel between the way I set up my research participants to fulfil the traditional role of expert teachers in their relationship with me, and the 'expert' role my students want me to take with them. I refuse to do this as their lecturer instead seeking to create a learning environment where everyone's knowledge is valued and shared. I now recognise my students' exasperation in my own feelings towards my participants. I cannot help but wonder at the power of some discourses to pervade our lives.

My goal to write a 'How to' manual was intended as a 'celebration' of my participants' expertise. I stop for a moment considering why I so dearly want to 'celebrate' my participants' expertise and why I refuse to write what I perceive to be a 'negative' research report. I realise that the long years I spent working in organisations with scarce or very limited resources, with people whose problems are overwhelming in a society which marginalises and blames them for their deficits, have not left me unscathed. I began my PhD determined to celebrate people's knowledge and skills not problematise and blame my participants for not being able to respond to my research in the way I expected and continue to pursue this approach.

I realise that my passion for this topic is driven not only by my teaching experience but by deeper experiences. My desire to create a learning environment that values cultural difference comes in part from my experiences living and working in Botswana, southern Africa, where I learned, to my amazement and at times great discomfort, how powerfully my cultural background influenced my responses to life in a rural African village. Such simple words as 'please' and 'thank you' are potent symbols in my Anglo-Australian culture but there are no words with a similar function in the local culture. When people came to my door saying, 'I want sugar. I want…. .' I struggled constantly to restrain my instinctive retort and negative judgements. I am also motivated by the dreadful shame I felt on returning to Australia to really 'see' the insidious and omnipresent racism experienced by Indigenous Australians. This is especially potent for me as I have been personally responsible for removing Aboriginal children from their families. These

children were genuinely 'at risk' within our legal definition, however, I used only an Anglo-Australian cultural definition of 'harm'. I was blind to the greater harm being caused by removing them from their families.

Critiquing auto/ethnography

Absorbed by the insights emerging from writing auto/ethnographically I am aware that this is more a story of my experiences as a researcher than it is about the research project. Why am I finding exploring this process so absorbing, so satisfying and so enjoyable? Am I narcissistic or self indulgent? Roth (2005:10) articulates my private fears stating that '[a]uto/biography and auto/ethnography could easily lead us into the mires of fuzzy thinking, will-of-the-wisp inspiration and self-congratulatory, feel-good accounts of world events.' He continues, asserting that '[b]y advocating auto/biography and auto/ethnography as a means of generating understanding in education, we do not intend to support self-indulgence, ideology and prejudice.' Roth claims that conducting research using these approaches must be done in a disciplined, systematic and rigorous manner 'lest auto/biography and auto/ethnography lead to ideology, delusion and conceptual blindness.' (Roth 2005:9). These are serious charges in the 'academic' world. Other commonly used pejoratives label auto/ethnographic approaches as therapy, fiction, journalism, anti-theoretical, victim art.

As an aspiring academic researcher these criticisms are seriously scary and challenge me to re-consider my enthusiastic embrace of an auto/ethnographic approach to my own research writing. I do feel uncomfortable reading some of the very personal auto/ethnographic 'stories' about grief and loss (see for example Ellis 2004 or 'Vespers' in Richardson 1997) and I have a powerful urge to skip over the personal bits to get to the useful theoretical or practical parts of the article or chapter. I stop, realising that my professional work revolved around valuing people's personal stories and that a strong focus of my teaching is encouraging students to link theories with their own life experiences. Why am I so uncomfortable and impatient with these stories? More pertinently, why am I drawn to accept the charge of self-indulgence when my auto/ethnographic research account includes my personal stories of struggle?
I think is the context in which they are presented that troubles me, not their content.
I stop, realising I am slipping into traditional social science judgments of their value rather than seeing them as legitimate and evocative forms of social research writing that engage and challenge me. Will others judge my auto/ethnographic story as self–indulgent?

How do I judge the value of my auto/ethnographic approach to writing my story as social research? Richardson (2000:937) says she holds auto/ethnography 'to high and difficult standards; mere novelty does not suffice.' She lists the five criteria she uses when reviewing social science papers for publication. These are: the *substantive contribution* the paper makes to understanding social life through 'a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective'; its demonstrated *aesthetic merit* meaning its complexity, interest, satisfying structure and whether it invites interpretative responses; demonstrated *reflexivity* informed by postmodern epistemologies; its emotional and intellectual *impact*; and lastly, is it *an expression of a reality* in other words, an honest and credible account

of a personal, social or cultural experience? I nod as I read, thinking, yes, I can work towards meeting these criteria. I feel less intimidated by the strident criticisms.

By introducing the 'self' into social research the auto/ethnographic writer makes a claim for the importance the author's perspective 'in' the text as against making claims 'for' the text itself. Whilst auto/ethnographers, informed by poststructuralist perspectives, recognise the self-writing as offering a partial and situated perspective, Gannon (2006:477) says that having claimed a space for the author to represent herself , 'much autoethnographic work leaves the speaking self relatively untroubled in the text.' She proposes that poststructural, auto/ethnographic writing needs to further 'destabilise the authority of the self who writes and knows himself or herself as a discrete and autonomous subject' by continually theorising the 'self' within the auto/ethnographic relationship. (Gannon 2006:477). In this way she says, auto/ethnography can both write and destabilise the self at the same time in 'con(texts) that promote an ethics of care (Denzin 2003 p.125) and that foreground the limits and fragilities of self-knowledge.' (Gannon 2006:492). The charge of self-indulgence perhaps reflects a tendency for auto/ethnographers to put our own perspectives on a pedestal and to privilege the perceived truths in our personal stories, simply because they are our own stories. Gannon (2006) encouragement to critically reflect on my own changing subjectivity is timely.

(Catching myself again)

Gannon's (2006) reference to the 'limits and fragility of self-knowledge' stays with me. In a self- congratulatory tone I recently told Eva, a respected colleague, about my own critique of auto/ethnographic writing. She gently chided me for engaging in what she calls 'disabling' practices, more characteristic of the 'argumentative rhetoric of academic discourse' (Gannon 2006:476). I feel ashamed of trying to raise my own academic status by criticising the work of auto/ethnographers whose writing gives me so much. I realise that seeking to find a 'gap' in the research, to make one's mark, is a traditional academic game that focuses on taking something away rather than building on what is there. Conferences, in my experience, offer a perfect opportunity to foreground one's own expertise at a presenter's expense.

The pejorative labels employed by critics of auto/ethnography reflect metaphoric schemes that contribute to an 'academic and intellectual culture of hostility, argumentativeness and confrontation' (Richardson 2000:927). A patent example of the use of metaphors of war in academic writing is Brewer's (2000:173) 'vigorous defence of ethnography from its postmodern critics'. He refers to the academic literature as a 'battleground', his intellectual colleagues as 'combatants', and ethnography as being 'sniped at'.

These metaphors are not intended to be neutral but as a strategic response in an academic power game. Butler (1997:16) explains that '[t]he one who speaks hate speak is imagined to wield sovereign power, to do what he or she says when it is said.' Sovereign power is embedded in the authority of academic language and writing, so familiar as to be perceived as neutral, but so powerful as to be accepted as a 'truth'. Power is apparent in the pejorative language used to critique auto/ethnography and perhaps suggests the

degree of challenge auto/ethnography poses to traditional social research discourses. My experiences encourage me to reframe the charge of 'self-indulgence', changing its meaning from pejorative to positive. Auto/ethnography urges me to value and give voice to my 'self' in the research process that is both challenging and intensely pleasurable, indeed, delightfully 'indulgent'**.**

The Research Project

My project is not designed as auto/ethnographic research but will be written up using an auto/ethnographic approach as the process of reflecting on my values and beliefs and their impact on the 'doing' of the research is crucial to addressing the ethical issues I face. Richardson helps to explain saying that "[s]cientific superstructure is always resting on the foundation of human activity, belief, and understandings." (Richardson & St. Pierre 2005:964).

The most striking impact on the research project, looking now through my understandings of poststructural auto/ethnography, is the change in the balance of responsibility for the outcomes of the research. Through exploring my own role as the researcher the anger, frustration and disappointment I felt towards my participants has dissolved to be replaced by an approach of respectful shared learning. I can now write honestly and openly in way that reflects ethics of respect and care rather than puzzled disapproval. I can produce an enabling text that recognises and celebrates what we have co-created, rather than a disabling text that catalogues the deficits and 'lessons learned' from a 'failed' social research project. Given the personal investments with which I loaded the research, this represents an enormous change for me and the way I write up the research.

I now see that there are no 'experts' to provide me with the 'answers' to my research questions. The principles and strategies I sought from my participants are reflections of my values and beliefs about research. I will now approach the analysis of the interview transcripts in a spirit of co-creation which involves a dialogue around questions that arose from the interviews but went unacknowledged. Some of these include: Is there a place for cultural awareness in university education? What might that be? How might it look? Does the role of the lecturer include developing students' cultural awareness? The participants contribute to that dialogue and I now see their frustrations with my questions as a response to my inadvertent challenge to their beliefs about what 'belongs' in a university subject and lecturers 'do'. Faced with my persistent questioning about something they see as 'outside' their understandings of their role and function, they were forced to repeatedly declare, with increasing frustration, the boundaries of their roles.

As I think about how to structure my auto/ethnographic write-up of this research, how to choose which themes to highlight, what concepts to draw out of it, I say to Eva, an inquiring colleague, that I need to decide which 'face' to put on the research. She counters with a metaphor of her own suggesting the research needs to 'rest in its own cradle', and she challenges me to consider why I need to find a 'face' and to identify whose face it will be looking into? Will my 'face' be chosen to meet the expectations of

those by who my research is to be judged? Her metaphor stays with me as a reminder of my subjectification and my agency to change the form of subject I will be.

Conclusion

This paper explores some of the discourses that influence my subjectivity as a researcher and my engagement with a research project that set out to explore how lecturers experience teaching in multicultural classrooms. As I write this paper I continue to learn about my relationship with 'research' and this research project in particular. If I start writing all over I will take a different perspective and highlight other insights, connections, relationships that emerge as I write. Auto/ethnographic writing approaches offer me a way to bring to the fore values and beliefs I unknowingly brought into my research and examine the impact they have on the entire project. I continue to explore the balance between writing about 'self' and 'other' and challenge the critique of auto/ethnography as 'self indulgent' by reframing a focus on 'self' as being essential and enlightening for my own understanding of ethical research practice. I continue to urge myself to greater honesty, openness and connectedness as a researcher.

My understandings of auto/ethnography are encapsulated, for the moment, in a quote I happened upon. Armando, a Dutch artist, poet, novelist and filmmaker, commenting on his writing and art practice, says 'Little by little I begin to understand that one should not write or paint the things one knows. One should write or paint that which hides itself between knowing and understanding.' (Armando 1986:161 cited in Ernst Van Alphen 1998:220)

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