

Autoethnography as a Way to Foster Critical Thinking Skills for Academicians in Adult and Higher Education: A Queer (Asian) Crit Perspective and Example

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Abstract: This paper will focus on how autoethnography helps adult educator foster critical thinking skills in adult and higher education and will address the following areas: autoethnography, critical thinking, and examples of the autoethnographic teaching methodology. This paper will conclude with some discussion and implications for implementing autoethnography in teaching adults.

Introduction

Social scientists have developed and implemented various research studies using various research methodologies. Although there are various components in research process, when researchers design their own studies, it is important for them to keep in mind four primary elements (epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods) because they are the foundations of research design that lay out a research process (Crotty, 1998).

In the social sciences, typically, research is understood as “a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 2). Such a systematic process requires an effective research methodology that aims: to determine a more effective practice and improve one’s own practice, to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon and develop a better application of one’s knowledge about it, and to study other’s cultures and *one’s own culture* (Patton, 2002). The last phrase is important to this present article. How can one study one’s own culture through a research process?

For some scholars who usually conduct quantitative research, research needs to be 99.9 percent objective and replicable; and for the others who typically conduct qualitative research, research should be a process of creating meaning with an emphasis on understanding (Creswell, 2014). Since the field of social sciences has traditionally been dominated by objectivist (quantitative) scholars, constructionist and subjectivist (qualitative) research studies still experience some resistance in the field (Glesne, 2011). In particular, autoethnography, which contains both constructionist and subjectivist epistemological perspectives, has had a difficult time becoming accepted as a valid research methodology in the social sciences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

However, in recent years, autoethnography seems to have gained its own ground in qualitative research and in social sciences research as there have been an increasing number of research publications of autoethnographic studies. But that growth has only happened gradually; getting accepted as a valid research method not only in the field of social sciences but also in the field of qualitative research has been a slow process for autoethnography.

Although autoethnography has slowly been gaining its ground in social sciences, adult and higher education has not utilized it as a valid research methodology or as a part of andragogical practice yet. Furthermore, although we as practitioners use a lot of life stories and emphasize critical reflections in our own teaching and practice, we often neglect to critically

study our own culture. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to lay out how autoethnography applies to teaching in adult and higher education. Furthermore, this paper will provide a few of my own examples of autoethnographic studies that utilize a queer crit perspective.

Relevant Literature

In contemporary education, according to Palmer (2007), it has been challenging to teach students how to carry out and develop critical ways of thinking. One of the reasons why students in contemporary education are not equipped with critical thinking skills is because they have not been taught appropriate ways to foster their critical thinking skills (Palmer, 2007). Although it would be easy to put the blame on students, educators themselves have also been shown to not have had their critical thinking skills fostered or developed to a great degree while they were in higher education as students (Brookfield, 2012). However, despite any inability to fully utilize their own critical thinking skills, it is not rare for educators and practitioners to complain about how students behave unprofessionally in a classroom or about how students are intellectually unable to investigate or even consider various perspectives and solutions to problems. Brookfield (1995, 2013) argued that educators should be able to foster and fully develop their own critical thinking skills before they actively implement teaching that requires critical thinking skills.

In order for educators to be sufficiently equipped with critical thinking skills, educators need to be able to be critically reflective about their own practices. Merriam and Bierema (2014) stated that the process of being critical is an important aspect of contemporary education because it provides additional opportunities to gain a better understanding of issues and topics that are discussed in a class. For example, when addressing a social context in adult education, educators not only need to deliver contents on social class, gender, and race but they also need to address sexual orientation and immigration. That is, being able to notice pieces of the puzzle that are missing and then delivering content on them is crucial for educators. Teaching skills such as that would provide more ways for students to take a look at social issues. So, how do educators practice or acquire such skills?

To respond to that question, Brookfield (1995) proposed four lenses that can enable educators to be reflective. The first critically reflective lens is about educators' autobiographies as learners and teachers. This lens requires educators to think about their own practices from both the viewpoint of learners and of educators based on their life experiences or their autobiographies. This lens also allows educators to examine their own practice not only from their perspectives as educators but also from their perspectives as learners.

The second critically reflective lens takes into account the student eye, enabling an educator to see how educational practices are viewed and experienced by their students. "Seeing ourselves as students see us makes us aware of those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationships in the classroom" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 30). Similarly, the third critically reflective lens considers colleagues' experiences in an educator's practice. Brookfield (1995) stated that feedback and comments about teaching are valuable when educators critically reflect on their own practices because "we can notice aspects of our practice that are normally hidden from us. As they describe their readings of, and responses to, situations that we face, we see our practice in a new light" (p. 30). The fourth and final lens is to look into educators' practices from the perspective of theoretical literature. Existing theoretical literature on teaching and other educational issues can enhance educators' practices because such literature "can provide multiple interpretations of familiar but impenetrable situations. It can help us understand our experience by naming it in different ways, and by illuminating generic aspects of what we thought were idiosyncratic events and processes" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 30).

In addition to fostering critical thinking skills in themselves, practicing the integration of critical thinking skills into teaching by educators will help students learn ways they can develop their own critical thinking skills. Brookfield (2012) provides one of the best and most comprehensive definitions of what critical thinking is:

Critical thinking describes the process by which students become aware of two sets of assumptions. First, students investigate the assumptions held by scholars in a field of study regarding the way legitimate knowledge is created and advanced in that field. Second, students investigate their own assumptions and the way these frame their own thinking and actions. Thinking critically requires us to check the assumptions that we, and others, hold, by assessing the accuracy and validity of the evidence for these assumptions and by looking at ideas and actions from multiple perspectives. A person who thinks critically is much better placed to take informed actions; actions that are well grounded in evidence and that are more likely to achieve the results intended. (p. 157)

From that definition, Brookfield (2012) outlined a basic process for critical thinking. According to him, people go through four steps on their way to becoming a critical thinker:

1. Identifying the assumptions that frame our thinking and determine our actions,
2. Checking out the degree to which these assumptions are accurate and valid,
3. Looking at our ideas and decisions (intellectual, organizational, and personal) from several different perspectives, and
4. On the basis of all this, taking informed actions. (Brookfield, 2012, p. 1)

Similarly, for some scholars, being critical often means to be able to know about and understand oneself. Palmer (2007) stated, “the work required to ‘know thyself’ is neither selfish nor narcissistic. Whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our students and our scholarship well. Good teaching requires self-knowledge” (p. 3). Having self-knowledge helps educators become critically reflective teachers who understand and examine their own practices from both teacher and learner perspectives.

In the same way, placing emphasis on self-reflection, particularly of self-knowledge, is important in research practice in social sciences when researchers construct, reconstruct, and present narratives from participants. Qualitative research typically situates within constructionist and subjectivist epistemological orientations (Crotty, 1998). From the constructionist and subjectivist perspectives, Butler-Kisber (2010) discussed how important is it for qualitative researchers to become more aware of their own self-knowledge because it influences how they present their findings from data. Indeed, a qualitative researcher is an instrument of the research project because the researcher designs the research, develops a research instrument for data collection, collects the data, analyzes the data, interprets the data, and makes a conclusion based on their own understanding and interpretation (Merriam, 2002). So, qualitative research practically requires that researchers critically reflect on their own research practice and reveal their own subjectivities throughout the process (Goodson, 2013; Pascale, 2011).

In order to be more aware of their subjectivities and thus critically reflective, some qualitative researchers conduct autoethnographical qualitative research. Ellis, Adams, and Bocher (2011) have stated, “autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (p. 273). This self-analysis and reflection about one’s cultural experience require autoethnographic researchers to develop and utilize autobiographical narratives that explore “the writer’s own experience of life. It is an approach in which the

researcher/subject draws upon his or her experience, story and self-narrative to examine and connect with the social context” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 201). Researchers who practice autoethnographic studies make a connection between their own experiences with others’ experiences in a social context. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) argued that autoethnography is not just a research approach. Rather, it is both a research process and a research product. Savin-Bade and Major (2013, p. 201) offered five requirements for data collection of an autoethnographic inquiry:

- Chronicling the past
- Undertaking an inventory of the self
- Using approaches that enable visualizing the self
- Undertaking self-observation
- Collecting self-reflective data

These five requirements are pivotal to autoethnography because they influence the credibility, trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of autoethnography itself (Savin-Bade & Major, 2013). So, the responsibility of an autoethnographer is to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the subjective nature of their qualitative inquiry. In that way, an autoethnographic approach seems to be closely related to critical thinking skills, the same that need to be fostered through education. An autoethnography places heavy emphasis on critical self-reflection.

An Example of Queer Asian Crit Autoethnography

Below is a short autoethnographic writing of mine. Since it is a personal writing, I do not want to fully disclose its details, so I have opted to not indicate the year it was written.

January 15, 20##

I have always wondered how people make certain assumptions about others. For example, when I came to the United States, I was suddenly categorized as Asian, not as a Japanese person (Misawa, 2009). I had been very accustomed to being called or categorized as Japanese. Also, people always seemed to identify me as or assume that I am a heterosexual person who either has a girlfriend or wife (Misawa, 2010). I was very much amazed by how people make certain assumptions about Asian men.

I had a meeting with local scholars this evening at a local coffee store. There were three Asian people there including me, two African Americans, two White Americans, and one Latino American. We discussed how social justice should be practiced in the South in the United States and how important it would be for us to continue to practice research or teaching based on social justice.

When we introduced ourselves, some of the scholars there started asking if we all have partners or significant of others. Also, only three of us (Asian scholars) were asked where we were from and where we were born. I did not mind answering these questions because I was already familiar with those questions from my previous experiences in the United States. People always seem to be very much interested in where I am from because they usually think that I am a Korean or Chinese man, not a Japanese man. However, when I looked at the other two Asian scholars while I was introducing myself, they seemed to be very upset and angry. I was not sure why they were upset at that time. However, when their turn came and they started introducing themselves, I kind of got an idea why they were upset about those questions because I do not think that I would be happy to answer those questions if I were born in the United States because those other scholars unconsciously perceived and identified those two other Asian scholars as “other” and that is one thing Sue (2010) pointed out in his book. That kind of origins questioning causes microaggressions to people whom are identified by people they meet as others. In this case, race and ethnicity played out to cause microaggressions to my Asian colleagues.

At the same meeting when we had a break between sessions, I was approached by those two Asian scholars who were very upset about the situation because it was a meeting about social justice and social justice research and people there were not really sensitive about different identities. I kind of agreed with them at that time. But they also asked me a question that made me upset. They asked me if I have a wife or girlfriend because I said at the introduction I had a partner. I did not say anything about the gender of my partner, female or male. I just said I had a partner. I eventually said,

“Yes, I do have a partner. *He* lives with me.”

Then, they asked me, “What does *she* do?”

I said, “*He* is a college student.”

They asked me, “What is *she* studying?”

I said, “*He* studies computer sciences and is graduating within two semesters.”

Then, they asked me, “Wow. *She* must be a smart *girl*.”

I kind of froze there. I mean I kept saying the male pronoun to indicate that I had a male partner who lived with me and studied computer sciences. But they, two Asian American scholars, did not seem to get that I was gay. Their assumptions were that I was an Asian scholar who was from Japan. Because I was Asian, I was supposed to be a heterosexual who had a girlfriend or wife. I really felt that I was in a community that overemphasized heteronormativity and heterosexism. I was kind of disappointed that people who practice social justice did not look into multiple aspects of justice all around.

Implications for Adult and Higher Education

An autoethnography like above would be an excellent addition to the field of adult and higher education in at least two areas: teaching and research. First, autoethnographies can be utilized in teaching adult learners how to foster their own critical thinking skills when examining new perspectives and issues in society. In particular, when addressing social justice issues in adult and higher education, autoethnographies would really provide adult learners with the opportunity to critically examine their own biases and viewpoints. For example, students could study their own cultures and life journeys first to identify their prejudices and ignorance on a social justice issue, which would give them a better idea about the current assumptions they hold on that issue.

Second, autoethnographies could also be utilized in research practice in adult and higher education for scholars and researchers who conduct qualitative or mixed methods research, particularly with research that emphasizes the qualitative component. In qualitative research, the researchers are the instrument of the research because they design the study, collect the data, interpret the data, analyze the data, and write up the study (Merriam, 2002). Because of their role as a research instrument in the research process, qualitative researchers must explicitly state their subjectivity statements in their work. How could one know about oneself without critically studying one’s own culture and perspectives? Autoethnographies would allow such scholars to become better acquainted with themselves and thus better able to elaborate on their own subjectivities as researchers when they work on their subjectivity statement.

Conclusion

Autoethnography has been received with a significant degree of academic suspicion because it contravenes certain qualitative research traditions. The controversy surrounding autoethnography is in part related to the problematic exclusive use of the self to produce research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, it is apparent that traditional criteria used to pass judgment on qualitative research in general may not be suitable for autoethnography (Sparks, 2000). This paper hopes to have demonstrated how autoethnography does actually contribute to the field of adult and higher education; it provided an example of qualitative research studies and

explained how practitioners and scholars can utilize autoethnographies in their own practices. The self needs to be a more considered subject and the self that was always there needs to be acknowledged for both critical thinking and qualitative research reasons. Exploring one's personal connection to culture should not be overlooked in adult and higher education.

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