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A Tree Growing Amidst an Orchestra: Autoethnographic Practice in Transformative Learning

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Keywords: autoethnography, transformative learning, identity development

Abstract: How can an adult make meaning from complex transformative learning experiences in order to become a self-authored learner? This autoethnography explores how a male in the general population describes his transformative learning experiences and identity development over 23 years. The author illustrates the value of autoethnographic practice by illustrating how it has promoted his transformation over three decades.

Overview

Autoethnography is a reflection upon one's experience within the framework of a theory or model. In the field of adult education, an underlying progressive premise is that education entails a systematic reflection upon experience (Dewey, 2008). Dewey (2008) links this systematic reflection on past experience to future choices by describing education as a "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 71). In other words, autoethnography can be a useful tool for deeper learning by adults.

This research project is an autoethnography related to meaning construction and academic voice. In the process, I have developed ten narratives that examine various aspects of my lived experience with the intent of extracting a deeper meaning from them. English and Tisdell (2010) explain the philosophical basis for this practice, "...emphasis on personal meaning making and personal development as part of spirituality is where some adult educators connect it to the humanism in our field" (p. 288). This emphasis on critical awareness of experience reflects current spiritual approaches to transformative learning and mirrors Mezirow's (1978) call for adult educators to help individuals "become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves..." (p. 101; Dirkx, 2001; Tisdell, 2003). In short, autoethnographic practice has significant implications for identity development and transformative learning.

This empirical research explores how autoethnographic practice can promote transformative learning and identity development over a period of time. While sociological and psychological literature encompass reflexive learning activities in professional development, very little adult education literature addresses the complex linkage of autoethnography, transformative learning, and identity development. This research suggests that autoethnographic practice is an effective methodological approach to data collection, analysis, and representation in transformative learning and adult development contexts.

The purpose of this autoethnographic study is to explore how a male in the general population describes his transformative learning experiences and identity development over a period of 20-25 years spanning three decades. For the past few years, I have felt a need to figure out my journey to my present self and what that means for my future goals. The resultant stories of transition and challenge have become milestones that I have used to look into my personal

history with the hope that I can make sense of my interactions with others. By remembering, retelling, and analyzing these individual stories, my aim is to craft an integrated narrative that highlights my past, links it to the present, and outlines a path for the future. The research questions directly tie to this purpose and are: 1) How does the individual describe his reflections of his transformative learning experiences (Wall, 2008)? and 2) How does the individual describe his effort to develop into a self-authored learner over time?

Review of the Literature: What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is both a methodology and a result. It is a narrative methodology which focuses on both the subject and object while exploring constructed meaning (Schwandt, 2007). The introspective process results in a narrative that attempts to tell a story of lived experience, self-dialogue, and reflexive learning. By storying one's experiences, a person seeks to integrate introspective journaling and ethnography—i.e., examination of the world “beyond one's own” linked to theory (Schwandt, 2007, p. 16). If autoethnography is a narrative method for adult development, and if transformative learning is a form of long-term development, then autoethnography can facilitate transformative learning over a lifespan.

Three significant themes emanated from the analysis of the literature related to autoethnography and transformative learning. First, autoethnography is a vehicle for personal development in adults. Autobiographical narrative methods can foster adult development and learning (i.e., transformation) through the communication of lived experience in space and time (Lim, 2011; Smith & Taylor, 2010). Such narrative tools can foster self-authorship by allowing adult learners to reflect on lived experiences for the purposes of self-improvement. Second, transformative learning is a mode of long-term development. Constructivist-developmental theories clarify the linkage between autoethnography and constructed knowledge (i.e., transformative learning) leading to self-agency and authorship (Smith & Taylor, 2010). The theory assumes that adult learning and identity development occur through transformative learning in a postmodernist context (Kegan, 1982). For example, a holding environment is necessary in which to grow and develop a fluid identity in a transformative learning environment. The final theme in the literature entails self-narrative practices as vehicles for adult transformative learning over a lifespan. Self-authored adults can use narrative activities such as autoethnography to help integrate identity development, self-esteem, and lived experience over time through a methodology of reflexive self-dialogue to create layered, complex storied meaning in a social context. Giddens (1991) suggests that, in modern society, there is a linkage between autobiographical practice, narrative, and the realization of self-identity through sociological introspection.

While autobiographical narrative techniques are well-established in sociological and psychological literature (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 2012), there is a gap in adult education literature on autoethnographic practice and its influence on identity development and transformative learning (Kroger & McLean, 2011). In short, autoethnographic learning activities could potentially help adults from diverse backgrounds to achieve Lindeman's (1926) goal of putting “meaning into the whole of life” (p. 5). This research project explores the learner-experience linkage within the context of the continuous development of my academic voice.

Methodology

The research methodology was based on a constructivist epistemology and focused on meaning making from my perspective as researcher and participant. I used autoethnography as a

methodology because it naturally links narrative activities and self-dialogue to identity development from experienced lived over time (Giddens, 1991). This emphasis on reflection and dialogue nested with the substantive framework of Transformative Learning Theory informed by Kegan's Cognitive Development Theory (1982) that directly supported the research purpose.

For data collection, I applied self-selected criteria for the release personal facts relevant to the analysis and representation. These criteria entailed medical history, issues of emotional sensitivity, or personal issues that would not contribute to the research. After data analysis and representation, a peer check helped protect my confidentiality.

The data analysis entailed developing personal narratives using a sociological introspective approach to link emotions and experience over time. Pals' Causal Connection Method (2006) in concert with Cranton's (2006) transformative question framework then enabled me to discern underlying themes and patterns grounded in a life-story construct (McAdams, 2012). Key data sources consisted of my fifteen personal journals (i.e., letters, poems, and drawings) and my grandfather's autobiography that I inherited. These sources totaled 1,909 active pages that contain some entry or artifact—e.g., doodle, drawing, note, reflection, or prayer—that I purposefully placed in the source.

This research explored my transformative learning experiences over 23 years spanning three decades. Key aspects of transformative learning theory—particularly reflection, knowledge construction, narrative reasoning, and relevant experience—informed the research questions that, in turn, drove the research.

Introspection and Analysis

Several documents were collected during this research. The documents collected include research journal reflections and event-specific artifacts such as correspondence, drawings, and poems. These “unobtrusive” data sources facilitate the triangulation of sources by augmenting the complex understanding of the targeted phenomenon through content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, pp. 108 & 124). In qualitative research, it is important to collect documents that offer additional context to the study to gain a deep understanding of the participant experiences.

I investigated themes and patterns with the following analytical focus based upon the research questions: transformative learning experiences, self-authorship, transition or challenge, and causal connections. To organize the data for analysis, I employed a three-level analytical construct. In the first level, I identified salient found stories of transition or challenge. This process helped me to discern key personality traits such as impatience, self-centeredness, neuroticism, and anxiety with verbatim extracts from the data sources. This level provides the background and setting scoped to specific milestones in my life. In the second level, I identified and coded causal connections in the representative stories. These connections included coping mechanisms in response to perceived challenges or tensions, values, motives, and psychological structures of identity. In a sense, this level of analysis refined the grammar of the plot. In the third level of analysis, I discerned patterns across the connections and each story to create a self-dialogue centered on various “nuclear episodes” that represent key milestones in my life (McAdams, 2012, p. 251). I used Cranton's (2006) transformative question framework to create these integrated threads-episodes by highlighting the research questions.

The final level of analysis permitted me to craft integrated scenes that address causes and themes in terms of my transformative learning and identity development over 23 years. I then integrated these scenes into a storyboard for the integrated narrative that serves as the script for a

videocast. Table 1 shows that these ten personal stories (first level of analysis) set the baseline for coded causal connections (second level) and the resultant seventeen themes (third level).

Table 1

Summary of Findings by Story and General Themes

Personal Story

Airborne School	Major Happy
Marrying my Best Friend	Toxic Climate: The Presentation Hijacker
A Professional with Mental Illness	Popop’s Memoir
Adjusting to a New Job & Role	A Journey Toward Carmel
Losing my Parents	Journey as an Artist

Synopsis of Cross-cutting Themes

- Self-centeredness and hypersensitivity to others’ thoughts of me retard my development.
- Humor, resourcefulness, and self-reliance enhance my resilience and my relationships.
- Art is therapeutic and can foster resilience through self-awareness and expression.
- Prayerful reflection on lived experiences promotes my lifelong development.
- I choose my response to the challenges of daily life.
- Selecting love over anger has been a significant decision as a self-authored individual.
- My fears have primarily concerned failure, regret, and loss of control (i.e., uncertainty).
- My fears have fed my mental illness.
- Refusing to take loved ones for granted permits me to invest more in my relationships.
- Becoming self-authored means consistently living a balanced life—physically, intellectually, & spiritually—on my terms while not obsessing about others’ opinions.
- My grandfather has unwittingly served as a significant model for my identity, humor, creativity, and resilience developed through long-term autobiographical practice.
- Spirituality is a metaphor for my relationship with God, how I interact with others, and my lifelong journey of awareness toward holiness.
- Prayer is the integrated path to improving my relationship with God, my choices, and development.
- Mystics have pointed out a path of awareness, patience, humility, solace, and true development given my Judeo-Christian cultural context.
- Let go and let God; be patiently consistent.
- Personal inquiry and spiritual awareness have permitted me to see beyond self-perception, to overcome past regrets, and to develop into a less self-centered person.
- Innovation in pedagogy leads to the development of creative and critical thinking in generations of students.

Autoethnographic Practice for Transformative Learning

Autoethnographic practices can promote the perception of control and self-esteem necessary for adults to construct meaning, heal past wounds, and move forward in their personal and professional lives through active reflection and communication. Psychological research suggests that the perception of control, personality traits, childhood, and socioeconomic conditions impact one’s health, choices, adaptability, and thus development over one’s lifetime (Infurna et al., 2011; Fadjuoff et al., 2010; George et al., 2011; McLaughlin et al., 2010). If autoethnographic research can shape an integrated story across disciplines and themes over time (McAdams & Logan, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006), then perhaps it can offer insight into the bridge between deeper adult learning and development. In a word—transformation.

To help tie together the three levels of narrative analysis with a visualization of transformative learning in an adult education context, I applied the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Nerstrom, 2013). The Nerstrom model helped me visualize how adult transformative learning centers on life experience. The key components of the model entail

experience, assumptions, challenge perspectives, and transformative learning that leads to further experiences (Nerstrom, 2013). Nerstrom describes how she personally envisions transformative learning in the guise of a willow tree. The roots represent foundational scholars such as Lindeman and Knowles; the trunk suggests the influence of Mezirow; and the subsequent branches and leaves depict the contributions of scholars who continue to develop the field such as Cranton, Taylor, Dirkx, and Tisdell (Nerstrom, 2013). My own contributions of micro-narratives are individual leaves and minor branches.

The willow tree is an apt image of transformative learning, but it is incomplete. There is a particular cacophony of social and spiritual activity that occurs throughout a lifetime and that influences a tree's growth. This activity includes social context, dialogue, and reflective creation as demonstrated in previous sections. An orchestra, with its numerous actors and instruments, can illustrate these influences with their ever-changing mixture of noises that somehow synthesize into melodies and harmonies that transcend time and space. Hence, a willow growing over a long period of time in the midst of an orchestra aptly portrays an adult learner who has transformed over a life of experience.

Conclusion

There are significant implications of autoethnographic activities for adult education. First and foremost, autoethnography, grounded in current theory and research, can foster the voice of individuals, particularly from marginalized populations in a contemporary society that is increasingly divided between haves and have nots. Transformative learning events can also inform adult development through extant frameworks such as cognitive development theory. Additionally, these integrated narratives can offer counter-narratives to break tightly held stereotypes in long-stigmatized fields such as mental health, service industries, and identity development. Finally, autoethnographic methods serve as effective tools to link lived experience with meaning making—i.e., a narrative approach to transformative learning.

This study suggests that autoethnographic practice is an effective methodological approach to data collection, analysis, and representation in transformative learning and adult development contexts. In a world increasingly marked by decentralization, politicization, and division, autoethnographic practice can offer an effective means for any adult learner—particularly those marginalized—to express his/her voice.

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