

Autoethnographic Reflections: Autoethnography as a Signature Pedagogy of Speech Communication

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the practice of autoethnography as one signature pedagogy of Speech Communication. I show how it works as scholarship, what it accomplishes for practitioners/students, and how it fits within Shulman's description and explanation of signature pedagogy. I show the similarities between various aspects of Bakhtin's dialogic process and autoethnography and propose that incorporating lived experience into the classroom is inherent in the process by which students understand the relationship between part and conceptual whole.

Key Words:

Autoethnography, Speech Communication, Identity, Signature Pedagogy, Perspective Building.

Introduction

Earning a Bachelor's degree in Communication allows students to work in almost any profession because the discipline is extremely broad, and the practices and presence of communication pervades all aspects of human life. This can be helpful and confusing to students who major in our discipline because Communication's scope can make it difficult to narrow down and define one's goals.

In general, students who study Communication usually work in the fields of public relations, media relations, organizational communication, which can focus on the collection and dissemination of information about an organization's internal and/or external communication, marketing, management, journalism, and social media management. I believe that in order to perform these jobs, communication students must be familiar with the basic tools and skills of communication: oral and written excellence, conducting interviews, surveys, focus groups, and library research. These are what Chick, Haynie, and Gurung call "essential, but generic skills that aren't unique to specific disciplines" (2009, p. 3). They explain:

Some faculty and departments are explicit about teaching their students to think more like disciplinary experts, whereas others focus on disciplinary content and related skills, with expert thinking an implicit goal. (p.3)

Both of these descriptions apply to the discipline of Communication. And, this is where the trouble identifying signature pedagogy begins.

Why the trouble? It is primarily due to the fact that communication has a derivative history. “Many graduate students and faculty, for example, are ignorant of the fact that the contemporary Speech Communication discipline came into being by seceding from its then parent discipline English.” (Cohen, p. ix).

The first department of Speech Communication was created at the University of Illinois after 1914. “Since the new profession had no theoretical or methodological foundation for research, the leaders of the profession urged that teachers talk to and observe workers in other fields” (Cohen, p. x). Thus, from its origins, Communication, as a field of study, was and is truly interdisciplinary. In some departments it is a science and in others a liberal art. This means that in Communication there are many disciplinary ways of thinking that are also not specific to any one discipline and therefore many signature pedagogies. In this project, I discuss autoethnography as a signature pedagogy, which is informed by my particular location within the discipline of Speech Communication.

I specialize in phenomenology and autoethnography. I study identity constitution at the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and geographic locale. In short, I study lived experience and intersectionality—how one makes sense of him/herself within a social, political, and economic matrix. My disciplinary ways of thinking center around critical thought, reflection, and identifying the conditions that make possible the appearance of one’s reality. This seems like a far cry from public relations or any of the professions mentioned earlier. But, appearance is not reality.

When I began to teach at the college level, I had to figure out exactly how my specialty, which was studying lived experience, could contribute to student learning in particular communication professions. A report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) helped me to see how studying lived experience could contribute to significant learning within my discipline.

In three national studies, corporate executives and human resources professionals were asked about college learning and graduates’ work readiness in 2006, 2007, and 2009. Businesses reported that college students need more work in the following categories: effective oral/written communication 89%, critical thinking and analytical reasoning 81%, ability to apply knowledge and skills to real world settings 79%, analyze/solve complex problems 75%, connect choices to ethical decisions 71%, innovation and creativity 70% (http://www.aacu.org/leap/public_opinion_research.cfm).

These studies indicate several important findings, of which I focus on two. The first is that, because of the changes in the economy and globalization, employers need their employees to be flexible, adaptable, and knowledgeable about a wide variety of things. They need particular skills, of course, but most of all, the workforce needs to be liberally educated in order to have any real success in the job market. Secondly, college

students need to be open-minded in terms of ways of thought. They need to recognize multiple possibilities, multiple truths, be able to adapt to new environments and conditions, and be flexible in their thinking and not limited by rigid binaries.

When I think about forms of instruction that will prepare communication majors for successful employment in the twenty first century, I turn to the methods and practices of autoethnography because I believe incorporating the self into the college classroom creates the conditions that make possible significant forms of learning for students and contributes to many of the qualities that business leaders demand in order to compete in a global economy.

Autoethnography is the study of lived experience within a larger cultural context. It is a kind of academic writing and performance that depends upon deep reflection, reflexivity, and narrative construction that pays particular attention to the relationship between the particular and the general—between part and whole. In this paper, I discuss the practice of autoethnography as one signature pedagogy of Speech Communication. I show how it works as scholarship, what it accomplishes for practitioners/students, and how it fits within Shulman's description and explanation of signature pedagogy. I show the similarities between various aspects of Bakhtin's dialogic process and autoethnography and propose that incorporating lived experience into the classroom is inherent in the process by which students understand the relationship between part and conceptual whole.

Autoethnography: What it is (and isn't)

Being a college student, one is exposed to a variety of subjects, experiences, and challenges. It is assumed that while students are in university they learn about the world around them and become prepared to meet that world head-on when they graduate. The one thing most colleges do not invite students to learn about is their identity. For the most part, the U.S. college experience is usually about studying, observing, or manipulating objects, or the other, what Lacasa et al describes as "closed universes that favor a decontextualized construction of knowledge" (2005, p. 291).

I believe that when we know about ourselves—understand our motivations—we have the ability to understand the other more easily. This is why in most of my communication classes I ask students to write about some aspect of their lived experience that relates to the concepts, theories, and philosophies discussed in class. Ellis and Flaherty consider lived experience "as an interpretive rather than a causal story" (1992, p. 5). This means that studying one's lived experience serves to better understand one's actions, moods, decisions, and behaviors, so that it takes on particular significance or meaning within a larger conceptual context.

There is no standard method of autoethnographic writing. It varies from author to author because, as Ellis and Bochner explain, "Ethnography is what ethnographers *do*. It's an activity. Ethnographers inscribe patterns of cultural experience; they give perspective on life. They interact, they take note, they photograph, moralize, and write" (1996, p. 16). Autoethnographic writing involves personal expression about a particular event or situation. It's not just writing about what you think or how you feel about anything. For my students and me, it involves careful consideration of one's lived

experience, which is often guided by ongoing dialogue in and out of the classroom. This is the way I learned how to express myself autoethnographically.

When I first began graduate school, I was a 28-year old Mexican American who proudly identified myself as White. Each time my professors asked me to discuss my Mexican American experience in Northwest Indiana, I explained that because I wasn't a real Mexican, I didn't have any Mexican American experience to talk about. (Viramontes, 2008, p. 337)

One of my professors suggested that I take an independent study course with her over the summer that focused on performative, autoethnographic writing. When the course began, she handed me five yellow post-it notes and sent me home to begin to answer each question: How did your mother die? How did you deal with the loss? What is your relationship with your father? What was it like to live with your grandparents? What does it mean to be Mexican? Over the summer I wrote and answered all of the questions and handed them in to her. When I got them back, my papers looked like the government redacted most of what I wrote. There were black lines through half of my work. She explained that the black lines were "ego statements," the things / thought were interesting, but that did not progress or enhance the narrative. This is how my professor taught me about the difference between a structured narrative and a personal story. A structured narrative is in one or more ways, instructive.

My responses to those five post-it notes became my master's work, a one-woman show called "Deconstructing the Oreo: Growing Up Latina." The performance and the text became the basis of my dissertation "On Becoming Chicana in the Calumet Region: A Phenomenology of Decolonization." Thus, the activity of autoethnography proved to be the kind of intellectual material that helped to transform me as well as my thought processes.

Autoethnography: What it does and how it works

Writing about one's lived experience is a difficult activity. It often involves reflection about traumatic incidents, sadness, loss, identity confusion, illness, and divorce. In many ways, writing a term paper about a topic that means nothing to you is a lot easier because there is no personal investment in the content.

"In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored" (Gergen & Gergen, 2002, p. 14). But writing about experience is only part of the process. After one has settled on the content and structure of the narrative, it is then time to consider appropriate forms of research about which to apply. The weaving of experience in and through research allows the lived experience to be situated within a body of knowledge much larger in context. As Pierre Hadot explains, "When one formulates one's personal acts in writing, one is taken up by the machinery of reason, logic, and universality. What was confused and subjective becomes thereby objective (2000, p. 378).

The activity of framing one's lived experience within a larger conceptual context begins the process of perspective building. Building or possessing perspective is

viewing something from a distance in order to see the relationship between objects. It is the creation of a point of view. In autoethnography, perspective is constituted by the narrative and its unique personal details as well as the theoretical context in which to frame them. Together, the narrative and theoretical frame constitute the autoethnographic text as a whole.

Autoethnography is an activity that helps to build relationships between part and whole. This building process shares some similarities with Bakhtin's dialogism, which means "double-voicedness" (Vice, 1997, p. 45). Vice explains that Bakhtin

...uses it to refer to particular instances of language, perceptible in novels and popular speech; and also to refer to a defining quality of language itself, and its most fundamental sense-making capacities. In the case of the former, dialogism refers to the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance. (1997, p. 45)

Essentially, Bakhtin believes that language invokes meaning at the personal level as well as the general level. For example, reading a newspaper headline allows the reader to frame the story in a particular social, political, cultural, and/or historical context, whereas through particular forms of speech in the story itself, allows the reader to access personal experience/understanding (p. 47-48). This is the inherent double-voicedness within language about which Bakhtin theorized in his well-known writings about architectonics, answerability, aesthetics, consummation, and chronotope. Here is a brief definition of each:

- Architectonics concerns questions about building—how something is put together—how things relate to each other (Holquist, 1990, p. 149).
- Aesthetics is a subset of architectonics and represents a particular point of view—how specific parts are shaped into specific wholes.
- Consummation—particularly organized/shaped wholes.
- Chronotope is a site/location/situation made possible by a particular time and space, and always a factor of someone's point of view.
- Answerability describes one's inherent response-ability to the concrete other. Concrete meaning experience, which is constituent of chronotope, consummation, aesthetics, and architectonics. Thus, one's ability to respond to the situation/experience/environment in a particular spatio-temporal moment.

These particular components of dialogism "are tools for what is essentially an architectonic enterprise. The need is always to specify relations between individual persons and particular entities as they constitute a simultaneity" (Holquist, 1990, p. 150). Bakhtin's discussion of dialogism actually refers to his first philosophy, which seeks to understand human beings and how humans distinguish between "I" and "Other."

Whereas Bakhtin describes the process by which we as humans perceive the world around us at the level of interpretive lens, autoethnography makes possible a similarly creative process of perspective building about one's past experience. When writing autoethnography, one chooses a situation or event on which to focus. All situations occur in a particular space and at a particular time in one's life. This event or situation is held in a particular light because of the circumstances that surround it. This component of autoethnography is comparable to Bakhtin's chronotope. The narrative structure of an

autoethnography is chosen by figuring out what components to include and how those components shape a particular story. This process is similar to what Bakhtin calls aesthetics—how particular parts are shaped into particular wholes. The narrative and theoretical frame combined, which constitutes a conceptual whole would be similar to what Bakhtin calls consummation. The perspective building process inherent in autoethnographic activity would be considered an architectonic project. And, finally, after building perspective and coming to understand the conditions that make possible one's point of view about a particular situation, one becomes accountable for the way in which he/she originally responded to the situation, which would be similar to Bakhtin's answerability. Because autoethnography deals with past experience, its creative process ideally produces a transformative affect on how one talks about and understands self within situation. Hence, one's expressions are likely to change because he/she now has a new perspective on a past event. In other words, language constitutes reality and the expression, or what we say, organizes it and our experience. "Expression is what gives experience its form and specificity of direction" (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 85).

Understanding the ways in which a part relates to a whole contributes to the areas in which executives said graduates needed more work: effective oral/written communication, critical thinking and analytical reasoning, ability to apply knowledge and skills to real world settings, analyze/solve complex problems, connect choices to ethical decisions, and innovation and creativity. I believe that showing students how to establish relationships between the personal and theoretical component parts is paramount to their success in the classroom and in their professions.

Autoethnography as Signature Pedagogy

Shulman explains that signature pedagogies are the standard ways of preparing practitioners for their particular professions. He identifies three structural dimensions present in signature pedagogies: surface, deep and implicit. A signature pedagogy's surface structure describes the way an instructor conducts class in order to convey how students should be able to perform in a professional and educational context. He uses the example of the authoritative law-school teacher who aggressively asks her students questions about legal contracts so that they understand that knowledge of the law is essential to success in the field as well as the ability to perform "verbal duels with the teacher" (p. 55). The deep structure describes what is *really* being taught behind the surface, which relates to the preferred ways of thinking of that particular profession. And, finally, the implicit structure of a signature pedagogy describes the moral and ethical dimensions involved within the profession and its practices.

Shulman used the examples of law students and medical professionals as his main examples. These particular examples are common to almost everyone who watches television or its equivalents. Because of media saturation, practically everyone knows what lawyers and doctors do and what kinds of performances for which they are responsible. I understand his use of these professions because they serve as excellent examples of what signature pedagogies are and do. However, communication professions can be almost any position that involves the creation, dissemination, collection, marketing, and management of information. In the discipline of Speech

Communication, much focus is on the practice and performance of public speaking, presenting, and many forms of professional writing such as standard academic, press release, blogging, journalistic, and report writing. All of these foci include research of some kind. Some Speech Communication programs also focus on identity constitution because understanding the self contributes to a more refined ability to articulate one's thoughts through speech and written texts. Understanding one's identity enables confidence, self-assurance, poise, and what I will call a communicative generosity, which describes a proactive sensibility, careful consideration before speaking, and listening with empathy. With a better understanding of self and the qualities it enhances, the student ultimately becomes a good representation of his/her profession as a whole.

Autoethnography serves as a signature pedagogy of communication because it is a way for students to gain a better understanding of themselves, which improves their human communication performance as a whole. Communicative improvement occurs through the three dimensions of its pedagogy. The surface structure is exploring lived experience through dialogue and writing. This practice conveys to students that the cultural expectations of communication professionals and educational settings involve effective writing and coherent speaking. What autoethnography *really* teaches students is that all human activity has a larger context, which makes it significant and meaningful. In order to fully understand a situation or event, the larger context must be considered and analyzed. Autoethnography sheds light on the complexity and nuance of human identity, which is the key to all forms of professional communication. For example, public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics (customers, shareholders, employees, newspapers etc.). Communicating with any of these groups is equivalent to communication with human beings and their complex identities as a whole. This analogy can be applied to any position responsible for creating, collecting, analyzing, disseminating, marketing, and managing information, which, again, is collected from complex human beings. Finally, the implicit structure of autoethnography focuses on moral and ethical dimensions of human communication behavior. By structuring lived experience in particular ways that make sense to the author, whether it be a "layered account" (Ronai, 1995) or sociological introspection (Ellis, 1991), doing autoethnography allows the author to examine how he/she comes to understand self and the decisions made and/or actions performed in particular situations. As Cristina Gonzalez explains, "When I'm writing an autoethnography, I am coding, I am keeping a track record of the way that I make my decisions" (2002, p. 121). Moreover, autoethnography allows for the close examination of the visible and invisible forces that shape and influence how one comes to understand and make manifest certain behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and practices. It is a way to think systematically about human communication behavior.

In addition to Shulman's three dimensions, he also discussed how signature pedagogies can be "characterized by what it is *not* – by the way it is shaped by what it does not impart or exemplify" (p. 55). This is to say that when one chooses to adopt a signature pedagogy, definitive choices are made about what values, ideas, and practices to highlight. This of course, means that other ideas and practices are omitted. As autoethnography is a qualitative subjective form of research and practice, it does not support the idea of one objective truth, that human identity is a fixed or stable performance, or that context is just a backdrop to any situation. On the contrary,

autoethnography highlights the presence of multiple possibilities, subjective truths, and the ever-changing context, which influences fluid performances of identity. These foci represent the ways that *some* Speech Communication scholars think and also to the areas of better educational preparedness that business executives and human resource professions spoke about the need for employees to think in these ways in the AAC&U national study.

On a personal note, I use the method of autoethnography as a signature pedagogy because of my lived experience with it. Most of the students at the University of Wisconsin Parkside are from predominantly working-class family backgrounds. The area of Southeastern Wisconsin has a long history of industrial enterprise, which constituted the dominant form of revenue for a majority of the population until the 1990s. If you are from Racine or Kenosha, Wisconsin, it is likely that you or someone in your family is or was a member of the working-class. 70% of our students work full and part time jobs as well as attend university. Many are parents and single parents and fall under the category of non-traditional students. In general, non-traditional students are characterized as “at-risk, possessing academic, social and economic problems that challenge [one’s] success in college – e.g. poor academic history, low self-concepts, limited world views, an absence of role models, family and employment responsibilities and financial needs” (Roueche & Roueche, 1994, p. 3).

I was a non-traditional student as well. I enrolled in college at the age of 22 after I recovered from my third diabetic coma. Right before I graduated from high school, I went to see my counselor, Mr. Lewis, to inquire about going to drama school to study acting. He looked at my records and then looked at me and said that I was not “college material,” which was his middle-class way of saying that I was too dumb to go to college. I believed him and decided not to apply anywhere. So, I thought long and hard about what I thought I *could* do and decided to go to beauty school and become a hairdresser.

I worked as a hairdresser and esthetician for four years. I cut, colored, permed, and relaxed all types of hair as well as performed facials, popped my clients’ pimples, extracted their blackheads, and waxed their unwanted hair from all parts of their bodies. I earned \$125 a week and had no health insurance. One day, I had to leave work early because I felt ill. Later that evening, I was rushed to the emergency room where my body went into its third diabetic coma. As I lay in my hospital bed, I thought about how my life was going nowhere. My job didn’t pay me enough to support myself, I had a chronic illness over which I had no control, and the only way I could get out of my parents’ home was to get married. It was then that I decided to apply for college. When I got out of the hospital, I applied and, to my surprise, was accepted. My first semester, I earned a 3.2 grade point average, and I never looked back.

It took seven years for me to earn a Bachelor’s degree while I worked full time as a makeup artist at a department store. Right before I graduated, one of my professors told me that she thought I’d make a good teacher. I applied to graduate school and for a teaching assistantship, and for the first time in my life, had a direction for my future.

Engaging in autoethnography allowed me to make sense of myself in relation to my family, culture, and the place where I come from, Gary, Indiana. Writing about my

experiences made me realize that in order to learn about my identity and all of its nuances, I had to know more about Mexican culture, U.S. and Mexico geopolitics, the steel industry and its relationship with Mexican immigrants, family history, capitalism, and much more. I had to understand the conditions that made possible my existence in order for me to understand myself. When I say that autoethnography saved my life, I'm not exaggerating.

In my classrooms, I see many students who are confused and have not only a limited worldview, but also no understanding of the significance of their existence. I know that autoethnography has the power to affect the way they think about communication concepts and themselves. Exploring lived experience opens up new ways of thinking, being, and doing that I believe will better prepare them for their professional and personal lives. After all, I am living proof of it.

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