

Research for Social Change: Using Autoethnography to Foster Transformative Learning

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In this column, we address the future directions issue of how to integrate research and practice into increasingly diverse classroom and social settings. Educators have a critical responsibility to acknowledge, respect, and understand people from diverse backgrounds. In the current classroom environment where many diverse cultures are represented, autoethnography may be an important tool to aid in our understanding of each other's backgrounds. As a sociological form of autobiography, autoethnography helps people step outside their immediate personal constraints to examine their social world through new eyes. Thus, we believe autoethnography, as a research method and educational practice, may be a promising way to promote personal transformation which, in turn, may lead to cross-cultural understanding and social change.

The following example illustrates how autoethnography can shift one's inwardly-focused attention to an outward socially-oriented focus:

Five years after an immersive experience of living and working in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, personal circumstances and professional opportunity intersected: it was time for me (Michelle) to begin synthesizing, analyzing, and writing about this extraordinary, life-changing episode. Along with two colleagues, I began my analysis using autoethnography. The story and experience began in 2002, when I accepted an invitation to work at a women's college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as Director of Continuing Education. I accepted an invitation to work in Jeddah, from a Saudi friend who studied for her doctorate with me in the United States. We had collaborated on research and projects in classes. Our families were close. We interacted and ate together. We were

sisters here. Because of this relationship, I expected and assumed much about the Saudi culture that proved very different in real experience. The mystique of the culture was difficult to penetrate even when working daily in an educational setting.

As a Director of Continuing Education, working with my friend and colleague, I assumed that I would be respected in my work at the college, and I would have the equal opportunities to participate in the decision making and implementation of programs developed through our office. When I was reprimanded for asking questions about the expectations of our work, and accused of betrayal when I answered a request for a program, I was shocked and hurt. This autoethnographic process helped me to research cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States. For instance, a hierarchical relationship is accepted as a norm in Saudi Arabia; therefore, the concept of collaboration does not include equal and shared power. If one person has a title above the other, this status cannot be challenged. Also in Saudi Arabia, people within the same group are expected to support each other at all times, and individual achievement is not as important as maintaining group harmony.

This knowledge has helped me to understand that my friend, now home, was functioning in her cultural framework. She did not intend to hurt me through this professional relationship. Systematically rewriting this experience through a different lens has facilitated healing, wrought from the pain of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

The preceding vignette illustrates how I used autoethnography to process my life and work in Saudi Arabia, to embrace the journey to the "self" through

reflective self-examination. It also shows that autoethnographic stories can teach by letting us view our own life experiences through the lens of new self-understandings and the understandings of others.

Autoethnography requires sociological introspection about a personal experience. Then, the author will retell it with emotions. Finally, the author will reinterpret the experience through a self-reflective lens. It includes the researcher's vulnerable self, body, and spirit, producing evocative stories that create the effects of reality, celebrating concrete experience and intimate detail, and endowing human experience with meaning (Ellis, 1999). Likewise, sharing one's experience, may invite others to recognize some point of similarity to their own lives, which, in turn, may lead to self-reflection and transformative learning (Cranton, 2006).

Classroom practices that use autoethnographic methods include creating case studies, journaling, writing experience-focused autobiography, or answering semi-structured questions such as Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaires (1995), and clearly support learning. Learners are encouraged to engage in "self-talk," inquiry about how they think about and experience external events, and reflection on how they clarify and expand their own understandings and feelings. Finally, sharing autoethnographical stories in the classroom allows people to witness and learn from each other's experience.

As our "world" continues to expand, we will increasingly encounter individuals in adult education programs who come from cultures other than our own. Adult education must expand its vision to include these individuals. Autoethnography provides a powerful, effective method that may accomplish just that. By

helping learners develop self-reflective abilities, autoethnography potentially becomes a tool for social change. Adult education classrooms provide a necessary environment to give access to many voices.

References

Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ▼

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