Exploring the relationship between autoethnographic research and critical action learning

Author contact details:
Elaine Allison, Chief Executive Officer, Scs Kinder, elaine@kinder.org.uk   0151 691 6111

Aileen Lawless, Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University
a.lawless @ljmu.ac.uk 0151 231 3851

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges involved in *doing* and *writing* ethnography and the use-value to an employing organisation. It is a joint paper informed by the researcher and the supervisor perspective. Therefore, we also examine the role and value of ethnography in Business School teaching, specifically autoethnography within a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA).

Our paper contributes to this emerging genre of autoethnographic work as we examine the use value of autoethnography within the context of a DBA. The DBA aims to develop researching professionals and in doing so has focused on research which contributes to the development of professional practice and the development of professional practitioners, (Bareham, Bourner et al. 2000)

We argue that by using autoethnography we can level the ground between the 'high ground' of the academic community and the 'swampy lowlands' of practice; producing knowledge and enabling exchange between communities.

Introduction

The DBA research explores leadership skills in third sector organisations and the potential of action learning sets to enhance these skills. This research considers organisations as complex processes of interaction (Shaw, 2002) and argues that it does not make sense to want to study 'it' from outside of these processes of interaction, to take up the position of the 'detached observer' (Lincoln, 1997). The only valid method of research is to research these processes from within; as a participant in the processes of organising ((Coghlan and T Brannick 2010). It is therefore necessary and important for the researcher (Elaine, the DBA researcher and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the organisation) to study her own experience as a leader. In their exploration of various forms of personal narrative, Ellis & Bochner (2000) argue for the importance of making the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right. They point out the extent to which this kind of research is valuable for the researcher (as she comes to understand herself in deeper ways which leads to understanding of others) and readers of their stories (who might find new insights from reading the researcher's stories).

As a charity leader who is experiencing the expectations from Board members, funders and government departments Elaine has argued that she is best placed to write about her experiences and has justified the use of an auto-ethnographic

strategy (Allison 2011) which will enable her to document these experiences and contribute to the learning of others as she progresses on her DBA journey. Aileen has supported Elaine in this decision, while highlighting the potential and pitfalls of an ethnographic approach, (Corley and Eades 2006).

Elaine intends to use action learning sets with participants from the organisation; all participants are in leadership positions. The DBA research will explore the learning that occurs as set members 'talk-in' and 'talk-about' leadership (Lave and Wenger 1991). Elaine is also supported by a DBA action learning set which is facilitated by Aileen, who is also Elaine's supervisor. The DBA is informed by critical reflection, and this paper explores the relationship between auto-ethnographic research and critical action learning. In doing so we address the following research questions:

- To what extent can action learning support the *doing* and *writing* of auto-ethnography research?
- What are the challenges involved and can the use value of this research be effectively communicated?

Autoethnography: exploring the challenges involved

Scott-Hoy (2002: 276) describes autoethnography as: ' *a blend of ethnography and autobiographical writing that incorporates elements of one's own life experience when writing about others*'; a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). However, autoethnography has many critics, some of whom have vociferously attacked the methodology as self-indulgent, solipsistic and narcissistic, (Etherington, 2004). In choosing to include our own experience in this paper we are aware that we may lay ourselves open to challenges of egotism and a lack of validity. Roth (2005:10) articulates our fears stating that: '*autobiography and autoethnography could easily lead us into the mires of fuzzy thinking, will-of-the-wisp inspiration and self-congratulatory feel-good accounts of world events*'. As we reflect on our decision to use autoethnography we find ourselves questioning who will judge our work, and feeling unsure as we consider the perceived boundaries between the 'swampy lowlands' and the 'high ground' (Schon (1995) of professional landscapes. We return to this theme within our discussion.

Writing about the recent growth in the use of autoethnography Delamont (2007: 2) comments that this growth is '*almost entirely pernicious'*. In her, deliberately proactive article: 'Arguments against autoethnography' she describes autoethnography as '*essentially lazy –literally lazy and also intellectually lazy*', (Delamont 2007: 2). In doing so she appears to position herself, and autoethnographers, in the 'high ground' of academia.

> It abrogates our duty to go out and collect data: we are not paid generous salaries to sit in our offices obsessing about ourselves. Sociology is an empirical discipline and we are supposed to study the social……..Finally and most importantly 'we' are not interesting enough to write about in journals, to teach about, to expect attention from others. We are not interesting enough to be the subject matter of sociology' (Delamont 2007: 3).

This statement suggests a very sharp divide between the 'high ground' and the 'swampy lowlands' which this paper would challenge. However, this perceived divide has been discussed by the DBA action learning participants. They have commented on and questioned why, many 'highly rated' academic papers seem to have a plethora of words that necessitate reading the research with a dictionary by their side. In discussing autoethnographic writing, set members have concluded that they would rather have access to non-jargon, realistic, honest accounts from their peers in the swampy lowlands than a polished academic article. Within this paper we argue that autoethnographic writing can contribute to the 'swampy lowlands' and the 'high ground.

In the case of Elaine's DBA research we are aware that she will be writing for two audiences, charity leaders, who can learn from and apply her research and a wider academic audience who can disseminate and challenge her findings. We are also aware of, and have discussed, the ethical challenges involved. Delamont states that autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish *ethically*: she gives examples: '*when Patricia Clough published poems about a lover's genitalia, did he agree to them, when Carol Rambo Ronai* (1996) *published' My mother is mentally retarded' did her mother give 'informed consent'?'*(Delamont 2007: 2). The concept of ethical research and informed consent are particularly problematic with ethnographic research, indeed this type of research may call for a: 'different kind of ethics' (Ferdinand, Pearson et al. 2007).

We would argue that autoethnography is a valid way to document the experiences of a charity leader as the 'story' is about Elaine the charity leader not Elaine the person. However, to what extent can/should these be separated? In researching methodology Elaine was looking for a way to present and document her own experiences that her peers would find useful and to contribute to her own organisation. The DBA course is designed to contribute to the student's own workplace environment and as such the use of surveys or another paper on leadership styles would undoubtedly be destined for the ever growing heap of papers on the desks of those in the 'swampy lowlands'. We would argue that Elaine's experiences are essential not because of egocentricity but because she is part of the research. Sparkes, (2000) argues that autoethnography must be about others, as well as the self, it cannot be self-indulgent. Ellis (1993:725) explained that 'the 'truth' of this story: '*lies in the way it is told and the possibility that there are others in the world who resonate with this experience'*. While many voices swirl in this work, and while Elaine is the main character in the story, she is not alone. She sees her organisation and her DBA action learning set *as* a 'community of voices' and her set members and the 'talk-in' and talk-about' which occurs will be a central feature of her research approach.

Autoethnography encourages the researcher to adopt a hyper-reflexive stance (Hayano, 1979) where the autoethnographer is encouraged to conduct a study within a study that involves depth of self-disclosure and analysis (Ellis, 2001). In this way two aspects occur: reflection inward and observation outward (Parry and Boyle, 2009). The contribution to leadership learning is drawn from the observation outward by examining the inward reflections through an exploration of situated curriculum. Ellis (2004:198) metaphorically describes these two parts as a sandwich—the bread as the interpreted observations, and the tasty filling the reflections on the experience.

In addition to challenging traditional views of ethics, autoethnography and other post-modern research texts 'trouble' familiar rules for judging the quality of research, (Etherington,2004).Richardson (2000:51.) has suggested that we need to find *'deliberately transgressive'* ways to judge quality that are commensurate with ways of knowing that underpin qualitative research methodology. She goes on to list the criteria she uses when reviewing social science papers for publication: does the work make a *substantive contribution;* does the work have *aesthetic merit;* is the work *reflective enough;* what is *the impact of this work on me;* does the work *provide me with a sense of 'lived experience'* . (Richardson 2000:519.

The traditional positivistic epistemological tenets of reliability, validity and generalization are treated very differently within autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).Reliability needs to reflect honesty and truthfulness (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005); in this context an honest and truthful account of the role of being a CEO. Bochner (2001) argues that reliability is anchored through the narrative being interconnected with life. Through the process of writing the narrative, Bochner argues that the autoethnographer generates a deeper understanding and meaning of their experience (2001). In this way writing becomes a process of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). For validity the story needs to have verisimilitude: '*evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible*' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 751). As a consequence issues of reliability and validity must resonate with the reader. Boyle and Parry (2007: 6) argue that generalization needs to be detached away from issues of the 'n' number suggesting that: '*the critical 'n' factor is the number of people who read the research, rather than the number of people who are the subjects of the research*'. Similarly Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that generalization is tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Stake (2005) interprets such generalization as naturalistic: a sense of empathetic appreciation from one world to another that provides a vicarious experience for the reader.

The above discussion highlights the particular challenges involved in doing autoethnographic research and draws attention to the ongoing process of writing ethnography. The process of writing ethnography is reflexive and the ideally leads to a product which can be effectively communicated to a range of audiences. We return to this theme but first consider the challenges involved in writing autoethnography.

Foley (2002) has argued for the use of 'ordinary' writing and a 'highly personal' voice in academic research and writing. This represents a breaking away from formal academic writing in an effort to narrate and interpret events with a style that makes knowledge more accessible. Autoethnographic writing resonates particularly for interpretive and critical researchers, who are interested in personal, local, and alternative ways of knowing, (Abma 2002), and reflects the 'narrative turn' taken this century, where researchers learn how to locate themselves differently within their writing (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). This type of writing values ordinary language over scientific language, and the use of metaphor, satire and irony to engage more fully with descriptions of life, (Foley 2002).

Richardson (1994), a keen advocate of experimental writing, argues that in writing evocatively on personal experience, academic research becomes more accessible to

a wider public audience than that of the academic world. Conversely to some of the following criticisms of personal writing, Richardson contends that if academic research is only available to a select few, this in itself may be seen as a form of self-absorption and narcissism, where the research is unable to make as much of a difference as it might otherwise.

Although this way of writing has been seen as inappropriately emotional, personal, or therapeutic, at the expense of being academic (Atkinson, 1997), it allows researchers to show how they are part of a larger cultural context and to document the details of the lived experience of individual people (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Writing autoethnographically changes the way we understand and use language in our thinking and writing, challenging us to reflect on the way we construct and represent ideas, it is a continuous process of critical reflection. 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). Autoethnography writing: 'displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply entwined; both are privileged' (Richardson 2000:930). Writing in an autoethnographic style usually means writing in the first person (Ellis and Bochner 2000) and in an evocative way that connects with our feelings, our bodies and our lived experience (Gannon 2006; Richardson 2000; Ellis & Bochner 2000).

Another powerful discourse emerges as we struggle to write reflexively. Petersen (2008 :3) 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 (2008:3) 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 2008:3)

Reflection and writing about the process of writing and the context in which that writing occurred creates a 'writing story' (Richardson, 1994). Given the relative newness of the genre, a few other autoethnographers have also written writing stories about their experiences with autoethnography (Wall, 2008). Sparkes (2000) has reflected on the comments of the reviewers of his personal narrative (1996) and has discussed issues such as the legitimacy of story-as-scholarship and the criteria used to judge narratives of the self. Likewise, Holt (2003) has thought back on his experience of publishing an autoethnography (2001) and discussed questions about validity, motivators, and self as data. Muncey (2005) expanded on the question of data in autoethnography and proposed various sources of data, explaining how they add richness to autoethnographic stories. Writing from a conservative perspective, Duncan (2004) cautioned potential autoethnographers against emotional writing, a

lack of honesty with oneself about motivators behind the research, and a failure to connect personal experience with theory. She acknowledged the need to deal explicitly with the validity, reliability, and legitimation of autoethnography within the dominant research culture.

These challenges are particularly pertinent for emerging researchers and those seeking legitimisation from an academic and a practitioner community. As discussed, Elaine's driver for completing her DBA research is the use value to her charity. However, in completing the research she also wants to attain her DBA and contribute to an academic and a practitioner community.

The DBA and action learning: supporting the doing and writing of autoethnographic research

Action learning is based on the premise that action and learning are inextricably entwined and it is this potential, to enable action, which has contributed to the growth of action learning within education and management development programmes, (Lawless and McQue 2008). Action learning has been represented as a learning equation: learning (L) = P+Q, (Pedler and Aspinwall 1996). However, different authors have provided varying interpretations regarding the components of this equation. Pedler et al. (2005) argue that the search for fresh questions and 'q' (questioning insight) must take primacy over access to expert knowledge or 'p.' However, critical educators (McLaughlin and Thorpe 1993; Willmott 1997; Rigg and Trehan 2004; Lawless, Sambrook et al. 2011) highlight the need for critical theory.

Vince exemplifies the ways in which politics, emotion, learning and organising interact in the context of action learning by adding an additional component to the original formula. This is the notion of 'organizing insight' which adds to the equation that action learning is also a reflection of existing organisational dynamics created in action: L=P+Q+O where O = 'organizing insight' (Vince 2004). He argues that organising insight provides a link between action learning and organisational learning and organizing insight becomes possible when:

> there is an examination of the politics that surround and inform organizing. In addition, to comprehend these politics it is often necessary to question these political choices and decisions, both consciously and unconsciously': (Vince 2004:12)

This type of questioning supports critical approaches to management education. These approaches are distinctive in that they strive to connect with the broader social structures of power, rather than the traditional liberal humanist concerns which focus on self awareness and personal tolerance, (Grey and Antonacopoulou 2004). Management educators who strive to bring a more critical edge to business and management education advocate an emancipatory agenda and offer a vision of a fairer and more just society.

However, Pedler (2005:4) argues and cautions that:

> The purpose of action learning is to shift the centre of gravity from thought to action as the basis for learning. This is the value preference that makes action

learning powerful and distinctive; but equally, in its deliberate pragmatism and busyness, it may also sometimes make it blind to wider questions.

These wider questions are explicitly raised by critical theorists and inherent within the characteristics of a critically reflective practitioner. Students on the DBA research a workplace problem or issue and action learning sets are viewed as fundamental to the programme design. Revans viewed the set as central to action learning and regarded sets as part of wider networks of sets in organisations, not as standalone entities, (Pedler 2005). Lawless (2008) examines action learning as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991). The DBA programme is informed by a belief that action learning can support students in 'becoming' members of an academic and a practitioner community. The DBA set which Elaine participates in, and Aileen facilitates, has explored these issues and the challenges involved in doing and writing research, in particular ethnographic research.

A key concern is; who has the power and influence to decide if an outcome is valued?

Discussion: bridging the gap – the potential of autoethnography and critical action learning.

Acts of autoethnographic reflection and writing, according to Armstrong (2008: 4) enable participants to: '*critically challenge taken for granted ways of knowing, ways of thinking and ways of making sense of the world, which bring the subjective an objective together.*' Critical action learning provides support and provides a 'safe place' for this questioning.

As autoethnography continues to emerge, define itself, and struggle for acceptance, it is important that those working with it reflect on the use of the method and share their experiences with others. The authors of this paper are not alone in their thoughts about 'who will judge' and are aware that for many years to come they, and others, will have an uphill battle with the many critics of autoethnography.

Autoethnographic writing can help to provide a thick and textured description of a state of being and also to interrogate assumptions about that state of being (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ettorre, 2005; Muncey, 2005). Autoethnography can address and problematize the role of the researcher when the researcher is explicitly located in a narrative and therefore cannot be understood as absent or neutral (Hertz, 2006). Warren et al. (2000: 183) refer to this process as: '*the dialectic of revelation,*' in which the writer and reader co-create or (re)negotiate an understanding of a shared situation.

Doloriet & Sambrook (2009) have evocatively illuminated the dilemmas involved in using an autoethnographic strategy within PhD research. They draw attention to a 'unique paradox' and address the ethical value systems specifically within a PhD context. Our paper contributes to this emerging genre of autoethnographic work as we examine the use value of autoethnography within the context of a DBA. The DBA aims to develop researching professionals and in doing so has focused on research which contributes to the development of professional practice and the development of professional practitioners, (Bareham, Bourner et al. 2000).

Schon (1995) has discussed the perceived barriers between practice and academic knowledge. He wrote about the topology of professional landscapes, where there is a 'high ground' and 'swampy lowlands'.

The Topology of Professional Landscapes
Adapted from McNiff & Whitehead (2006)
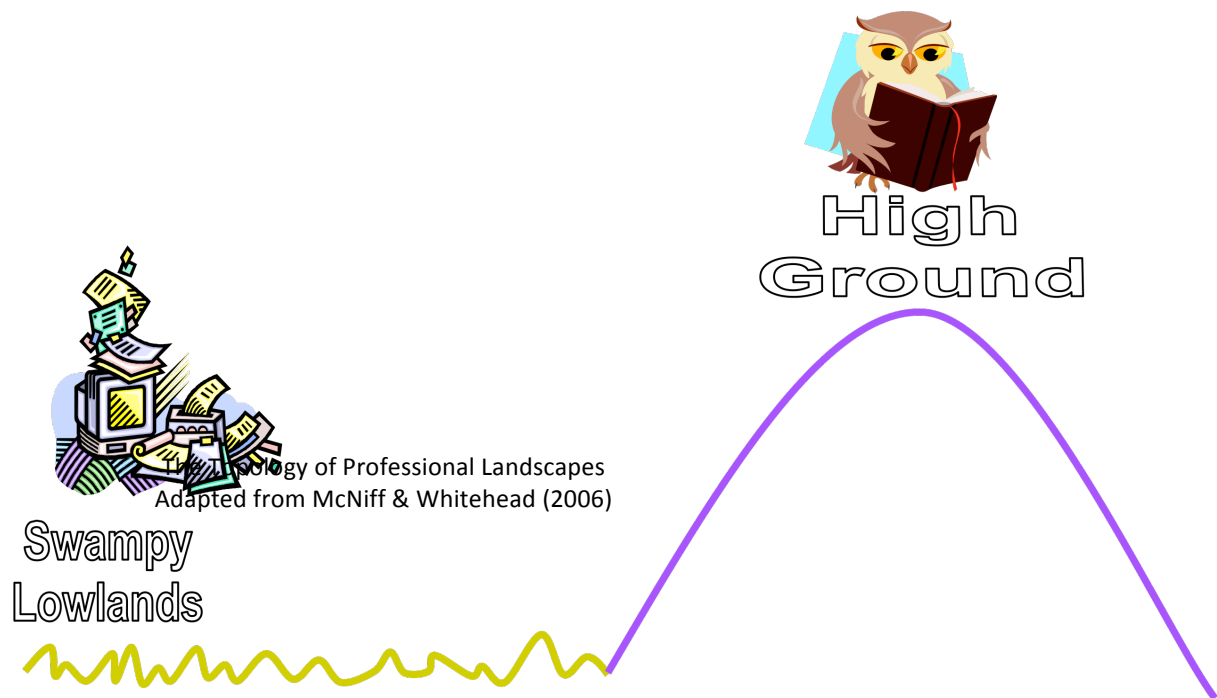
McNiff & Whitehead (2006) suggest that the knowledge produced in the swampy lowlands is the kind of knowledge that is of the most benefit to ordinary people. While the knowledge produced on the high ground is often far removed from the practicalities of everyday life. Schon (1987:3) highlights that it is within the 'swampy lowlands' where confusing problems defy technical solution but cautions that: '*in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern'*. Schon defines the technical rationality model of science as high hard ground overlooking a swamp but argues that moving up to patches of high ground can give perspective and help reflective practitioners to map the swamp.

We would argue that by using autoethnography in our research, supported by critical action learning, we are producing knowledge which is both useful in the academic community and the 'swampy lowlands'. This 'use value' will then be the criteria by which we, and hopefully others, will judge our research as we aim to level the ground and produce a 'not so swampy' lowlands and a 'no so high' academia.

'Not So High'
Ground

'Not So Swampy'
Lowlands
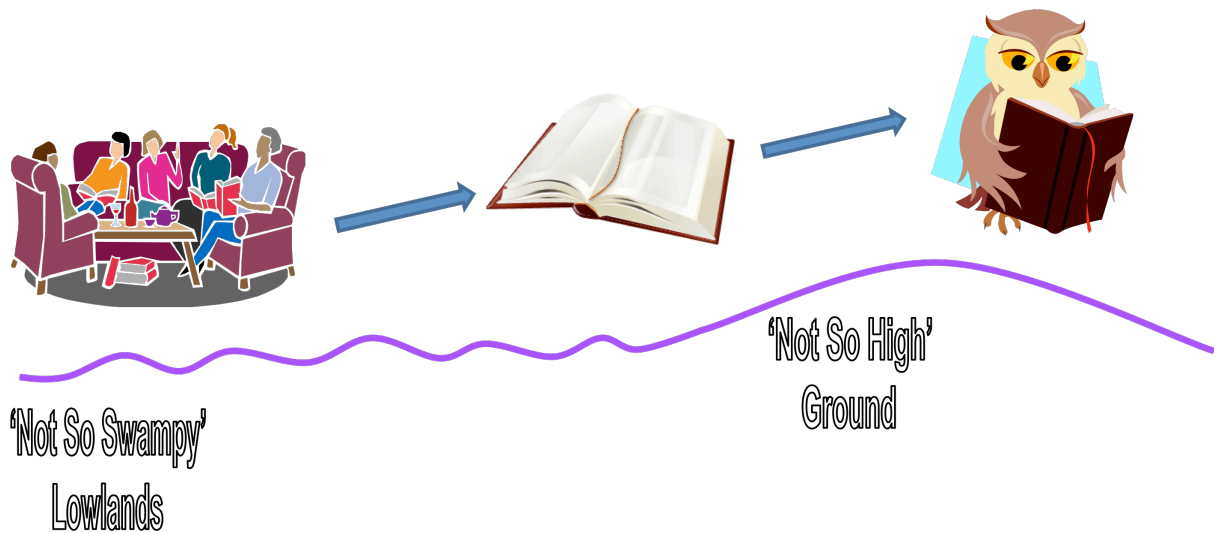
Within this paper we have discussed how the use of an autoethnographic research strategy, supported by critical action learning, as 'ethos and method' (Pedler 2005), can support this mapping and perspective.

In our day to day jobs we often find ourselves stuck in the mire of the 'swampy lowlands'. Elaine as a charity leader and Aileen as an educator; both share values associated with critical action learning. The DBA action learning sets provide a 'safe place' where set members can practice questioning taken-for granted assumptions and develop shared understanding of 'p' , programmed knowledge, often knowledge produced within the 'high ground'.

By writing together as researcher (practitioner) and supervisor (academia) we can work towards levelling the swampy lands between the 'lowlands of practice' and the 'high ground of academia' thus making a useful contribution to both fields.
We would argue that we are well placed to facilitate the levelling out of the swampy lowlands and are optimistic that the use of action learning sets in the DBA course and the charity, alongside the use of an autoethnographic strategy will lead towards a more level playing field between the swamp and the high ground.

We welcome feedback on our current approach and look forward to sharing experiences with others who have struggled in doing and writing autoethnographic research

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