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New technologies of representation, collaborative autoethnographies and ‘taking it public’: An example from ‘Facilitating Communication on Sexual Topics in Education’

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Abstract

New technologies for representing and communicating autoethnographies make it possible to be publically visible in new and interesting ways that weren’t possible prior to the digital revolution. An important ingredient in this process is the internet platforms that can make the digitisation of performances accessible across the world, even for short, modest creations from less experienced digital storytellers and film makers. As an illustration of the potential applications of digital technologies for ‘taking’ autoethnographic research to the ‘public,’ and making our research accessible to a wider audience we share ‘Reverberations,’ a collaborative autoethnography exploring bullying, homophobia, and other types of sexual harassment and associated feelings of shame, embarrassment and fear which often surround these topics.

Introduction

For many qualitative researchers, autoethnographic practices are our touchstone. That is, autoethnography is an important way to reorient a moral, social consciousness, and a means to provoke ethical sensitivities when we conduct field research or interviews. Without autoethnography, we risk losing awareness of the difficulty participants may

have when we ask them to put into words their personal histories. In our current research this is particularly relevant as we are exploring ‘Facilitating Communication on Sexual Topics in Education’ and asking our participants (who are aged between 14-16 years of age) to talk about experiences that often bring shame, embarrassment, fear, humiliation, physical harm and/or have been and continue to be painful and or traumatic in other ways.

Kim Etherington (Douglas & Carless, 2016) suggests that for practitioners, students and researchers in disciplines such as counselling and psychotherapy, the step from reflexivity to autoethnography may be less daunting compared with other disciplines as therapists are used to considering their own experiences as part of the counselling process (see also Etherington, 2017, 2004). Revisiting personal emotional epiphanies and then bringing these into the public sphere may also be more familiar to scholars and students within performance studies and drama (Pelias & Stephenson Shaffer, 2007; Saldaña, 2011; Spry, 2011). While autoethnography may feel natural to those within these disciplines, this typically is not the case for qualitative researchers in disciplines such as psychology, sport science and education. In these fields, sustained critical reflection on one’s personal experience (e.g., through autoethnography) is less common to the extent that neutrality, objectivity and distance arguably remain benchmarks for ‘valid’ research. This being the case, it is less likely that researchers in these fields will find supportive opportunities which nurture reflexivity, or explore the way autoethnography can increase understanding of ‘what it may be like,’ to be a participant, to be interrogated, and to have one’s private world made public.

Facilitating conversations: Let’s talk about sex

The catalyst for our collaboration was a funded research project that drew together a small group of researchers from Schools of health and community studies, education, psychology, computing, creative technologies & engineering and sport to explore sexual bullying, pornography and related topics with 14-16 year olds. As a research team it is fair to say we share a great deal of respect for each others' work and expertise; we recognise there are different methodological routes to answer our research questions (see Milnes, 2010; Tan, 2011; Turner-Moore & Waterman, 2017). While we share similar values and ethical concerns for our participants, we also, as a group, have some fundamental differences in our research practices. Not least of these is that two members of our team (Kitrina and David) frequently utilize autoethnographic methodology in their research, often alongside arts-based and performative methodologies. In contrast, other members of the research team (Kate, Tamara, Erika and Jon) have taken more traditional approaches with their research. While Jon is an accomplished musician and Kate has an interest and background in drama, these skills have not been accessed during funded research.

In practical terms this meant that Kate, Tamara, Jon and Erika may have been familiar with the term *autoethnography* and may have even understood, welcomed and supported its use, but as our project began, none were accustomed to putting their own body, life or experiences on the page to be observed in the way participants' lives, bodies and experiences were going to be. Nor had they felt the need (or been required) to show their vulnerabilities around the subject areas of their research (although it was common to share these experiences privately, or reflect on them, for example, with each other during data analysis). As long-time research colleagues, David and Kitrina were concerned about how to share their unease with failing to explore – as a group of researchers – our own experiences with the research topic. For

Kitrina and David, it seemed unethical not to ask *ourselves* the same questions we were asking participants. Equally, it seemed unfair (and perhaps unethical?) to expect (or coerce?) other members of the team to talk or write about difficult personal experiences when they had not ‘signed up’ to do this as part of the research project. This felt especially pertinent given the topic of this study; exploring potentially shameful experiences and vulnerabilities is challenging and not without risk.

These concerns were raised at a team meeting and through an e-mail exchange where the following questions were posed:

- (i) Is it ethical to ask young people about bullying and sexual harassment without also reflecting on our own experiences around these topics?
- (ii) Will talking about and sharing with each other our experiences of these topics help sensitise us to what our participants may experience when we ask them these types of questions?
- (iii) Does it seem right to present and share our experiences publically in order to blur the boundary between ‘them’ and ‘us’ and stand with our participants in these issues?

We used the occasion of a ‘research retreat’ (where we intended to explore transcripts of two participants using arts-based methodologies) to begin to discuss these issues. While we each seemed to recognise that giving voice to these moments in our lives would be challenging, potentially re-traumatising or painful, and likely to be at times unpleasant and uncomfortable, each member of the group decided that it would be a positive move. Specifically, it seemed to offer a way to demonstrate respect for our participants and show solidarity in a way that goes beyond words alone. That is, we

wanted to place our bodies ‘in view’ as our participants would be doing, but in a way that did not detract from the research or our participants’ experiences and stories.

To begin the process, we each reflected on our childhood/early adulthood, and those times when any of us had been bullied, felt shame or embarrassment over a sexual topic, or over puberty, and/or self discovery. We each then created and subsequently shared stories that evoked, illuminated and helped situate our vulnerabilities. In response to support and interest from each other, we then expanded on the story fragments we had written and shared these ‘in the round’.

As mentioned above, these tasks were part of our research retreat which took place in a beautiful house in a remote area of the North Yorkshire Moors. Here we went for walks in the hills, prepared and ate meals together, and played music. These activities were important to nurture creativity, reflection and to build the types of trusting relationships that make possible the sharing of ‘difficult to tell’ stories. Later that same day, after walking on the Moors, but when our own stories and experiences of these sensitive issues were still vivid, we each took part in an additional activity creating one-line responses to a ‘consequences’ game (responding to questions such as: where did this take place? what was said? how did you feel?) We each wrote our responses on six pieces of A3 paper, folding the page over what we had written and passing it on to the next person to respond to the next question. After responses had been written to six questions, the paper was unfurled, the responses were cut into six and each person took one ‘set’ of responses. Then we each spent time in different areas of the house and garden creating something that spoke to each of us from these responses.

New Technologies

Up to this point our creative retreat was probably much like many other creative workshops, gatherings, or processes used in creative writing workshops or at the beginning of a theatre workshop where ‘data’ or stories are identified to work on.

Our next step was to go into the garden where each person performed/read their work while being recorded by digital camera and microphone. Again, most members of the team were inexperienced in delivering a performance of research let alone one that was to be recorded, without rehearsals, so this task was by no means simple. Kitrina noted in her reflexive diary as she listened through headphones to these performances that even in their raw and unrehearsed state, conveyed something powerful and emotive.

Taken together the tasks and activities we had engaged with were, in different ways, challenging for each one of us, at times provoking feelings of extreme discomfort and sadness. But, even so, each member thought these important enough to engage in the tasks.

Importantly, this approach allowed each of us not only to voice something from our own experience, but also something from *each others’* experiences. By placing them together it had the effect of not leaving any one person ‘alone’ as the collaborative process knit our creations together intimately and connected our lives in a way that was both innovative, creative, polyvocal and profoundly personal. Indeed,

After performing the pieces to camera, additional digital footage was collected for use as a backdrop to the sounds and words in order to enhance the piece and to turn the digital representations into a more accessible short film. We watched the piece the following morning when each contributor confirmed he or she was willing to share the film publically as part of our research.

In ‘Reverberations’ (Douglas & Carless, 2017a) we present our experiences of being bullied, harassed, of feeling shame at school and of moments when, as teenagers, we felt vulnerable about our bodies changing from childhood shapes. The film is an accompaniment to ‘Whirlpool’ (Douglas & Carless, 2017b), which begins to incorporate the stories *participants* shared of their own experiences of bullying and harassment.

Reflections

After the recording we sat and discussed reflections on the day, the many challenges this task provoked but also the positive impact of these activities. We each felt the intimate stories we shared were supported in their telling by the environment we were in (a remote farmhouse in the North Yorkshire Moors), having time for conversation, communal meals, and even sharing food preparation. Also important was being away from the University and our own departments where we felt sceptical colleagues may have tried to ridicule or derail our process, perhaps as a way to deal with their own discomfort with the topic and how we were exploring it in our own lives. It was also clear that the arts-based practices (e.g., storytelling, the poetic consequences game) helped loosen or ‘dislodge’ memories buried in deep sedimentary layers of our personal histories. Also important to this process was allowing space and time to re-tell and share.

Our first aim for this film was that we would share our own experiences to sensitise us to what participants might feel, and stand alongside them through our research. A secondary aim was to do so in a collaborative way that was creative, developmental, interesting and that would leave no member of the research team

feeling alone with their story. A third aim was to extend and develop the use of autoethnographic and arts-based methodologies across our research team.

Using ‘new technologies’ made it possible for our stories to have an impact beyond being shared round the table or performed in the garden or at a conference. The film was premiered at the ‘Day in Autoethnography’ at the 2017 Congress of Qualitative Inquiry and is now accessible on YouTube. When shown with ‘Whirlpool’ recently at a public engagement event (marking the end of this phase of our research) participants, youth groups, youth workers and teachers suggested presenting our experiences (alongside participants) was a positive step and one they recognised was important ethically. Audience members were also keen to take the links to the film so they can be accessed for use in teaching and community action.

Salt that works through the whole batch

At the first Congress of Qualitative inquiry in New Zealand Norman Denzin explained during his keynote address some of the motives behind his decision to leave Sociology and move into communication studies. Sometimes it is very alluring to leave one’s discipline as the constraints and problems we can face means working in these environments (which can be hostile or ignorant of methodologies like autoethnography) make our lives and work difficult and sometimes impossible. However, through journals like *Qualitative Inquiry* and the *International Review for Qualitative Research*, and conferences like ICQI and its sister conferences in New Zealand and Europe, we have the opportunity to share and publish the types of research that was not possible back when Denzin was in Sociology. Put another way, Denzin has moved so that others can stay. And we ought to stay because sometimes we who practise and advocate for methodologies like autoethnography, form research

collaborations with colleagues who may not have access to or be aware of arts-based methodologies or research practices such as autoethnography. By leaving the sciences the impact of these alternative, performative methodologies risk also being lost, sidelined or misunderstood. If we believe these methodologies have a humanising and important contribution to make to the social sciences, and particularly our research practices, then we who use them might think of our contribution as being salt – where only a little is needed to flavour the whole batch.

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Kitrina Douglas, PhD is Director of the Boomerang-Project.org.uk, a member of the National Anti-doping Panel for sport and a member of faculty at Leeds Beckett

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David Carless is a professor of narrative psychology at Leeds Beckett University. His professional background spans physical education, health and the performing arts. David’s performative and arts-based research methodologies has informed over 50 journal articles and book chapters; several commissioned evaluations and research projects; invited lectures and seminars; conference papers and keynotes; audio CDs; and live performances. David is co-author (with Kitrina Douglas) of *Sport and physical activity for mental health* and *Life story research in sport: Understanding the experiences of elite and professional athletes through narrative*.

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