

Using Autoethnography in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Reflective Practice from 'the Other Side of the Mirror'

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Abstract

Borrowing concepts from autoethnography – a writing genre in which the researcher 'becomes' the phenomenon under investigation – this essay is based on my reflections and recollections of important events and insights that occurred during my participation in a professional development project. This experience has significantly altered my outlook on teaching and learning, as it forced me to reflect more critically on why I teach the way I do, and look at my pedagogical practices anew. The first part provides a brief introduction of autoethnography as a reflexive writing genre; the second part presents the broad narrative – that of myself as a 'neophyte pedagogue on a journey of discovery'; the third part reflects on the challenges of the implementation of the redesigned subjects (courses) in the aftermath of the project, and the fourth part raises some important institutional issues that emerged from the experience.

Introduction

Throughout 2006, I participated in a professional development project at the School of Management of the University of Western Sydney, Australia, that had the aim to review and redesign an underperforming Organisation Studies degree. Although I have been teaching in higher education for more than fifteen years, my participation in this project has significantly altered my outlook on teaching and learning as it forced me to reflect deeply on why I teach the way I do, and equipped me with sophisticated theoretical tools to 'think with'. It also provided me with an array of practical skills to transform surface learning into deep learning, giving me a newly found confidence in my ability to teach undergraduate management students more creatively and effectively. In short, this experience has considerably enhanced my Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Borrowing concepts from autoethnography – a writing genre in which the researcher 'becomes' the very phenomenon under investigation (Mehan & Wood 1975 cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741) – this essay is based on my reflections and recollections of important events and insights that occurred during the Redevelopment Project, and on the notes of the reflective journal I kept to document my shifts of consciousness as I gained new pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Autoethnography and Scholarship of Teaching

Autoethnography is an 'autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). It is part of a more recent style of anthropological practice known as 'reflexive ethnography' in which the researcher's personal experience becomes the focus of inquiry, illuminating the culture under study. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740).

As a reflexive genre of writing autoethnography situates *the self* within the context of a culture, sub-culture or group, and studies one's experience along with that of other members of the group. It is therefore a rather personal style of research characterised by 'confessional tales' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740) that do not figure in more conventional styles of academic writing. Autoethnography has no pretense of objectivity. The researcher's own experience becomes the object of investigation, as she is 'fully committed to and immersed' in the groups she studies'. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741).

Having used autoethnographic writing in the past to make sense of fieldwork experience (Duarte & Hodge, Forthcoming), I feel this method can be successfully extended beyond anthropology to SoTL. The main reason for this is that both fields are largely underpinned by *reflection*. For the purpose of this paper, I borrow Johns' (2004, p. 3) definition of reflection as 'being mindful of self, either within or after experience', as though looking through a window which will enable the practitioner 'to view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand and move toward resolving contradiction between one's vision and actual practice'. In the SoTL, personal reflection is about developing a commitment to sound pedagogical practices through a process of unveiling and representing the 'many complex layers of one's practice as a teacher' in order to 'investigate and analyse the complexities of teaching and learning' (Bass, 1999, p. 2). SoTL engenders a creative impulse to transform *teaching* experiences – in particular experiences of failure – into a *learning* experience. This is what Schön (1983; , 1987) calls 'reflective practice', which helps a practitioner to 'make new sense of situations of uncertainty or uniqueness' that they might experience (Schon, 1983, p. 61). Reflective practice fosters the ability to 'identify and scrutinize the assumptions that underpin how we work,' thus viewing our practice 'through different lenses' (Brookfield, 1995, pp. xii-xiii).

Autoethnographic writing begins with a descriptive narrative of events and activities that unfold within a particular culture and then develops into a reflective analysis of these events and activities to generate new insights and to enhance the researcher's sensitivity towards the knowledge gained in the process. In the case under discussion, the descriptive autoethnographic narrative is shaped by events and processes that unfolded over a period of twelve months as the project was carried out. During this period, I acquired a new identity which I describe as 'a neophyte pedagogue on a journey of discovery about SoTL.'

The Neophyte Pedagogue on a Journey of Discovery

As a *neophyte pedagogue* I write about a stimulating, challenging and fruitful experience arising from my participation in the project, and beyond. The narrative begins in 2005, when the Head of Program developed a proposal for a project to

review and redesign the Bachelor of Business Management (BBM) in order to enhance the structure and content of its units, and to make it more cohesive and aligned with the University's Graduate Attributes. The 'Redevelopment Project', as it became known, took place during 2006 and involved four unit coordinators from the BBM – including myself – and two associate lecturers who attended the sessions as observers. The sessions were facilitated by an academic trainer from the Teaching Development Unit. Workload allowance was given to all the participants, which proved to be an essential feature of the Project, in view of the added time pressures that it generated on teaching staff in terms of preparation for the sessions, participation in the face-to-face sessions and the process of implementation of the revised units.

We met once a month for three hours to reflect on our teaching practices and on the relevance of various theoretical concepts and techniques to the redevelopment of the BBM. We also discussed our concerns and insights in relation to the Project, and the progress of specific projects of constructive alignment within our own subjects, in my case two third year management subjects called *Power, Politics & Knowledge* (PPK) and *Contemporary Management Issues* (CMI).

My narrative is mixed, at times recounting feelings of euphoria, enlightenment and excitement, and at times feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity and frustration. The 'messiness' of the curriculum mapping processes made me feel unsettled and wonder 'Where is this all going?'. In retrospect, I realise that within that particular context the tension was productive, as it generated some useful insights and extremely rewarding 'Aha!' moments. As the Project unfolded, I felt elated by all the new windows of experience that had opened up in my mind which led me to understand and appreciate the difference between *surface* and *deep* learning (Entwistle, 1981; Entwistle, 1979; F Marton & R. Saljo, 1976; F Marton & R Saljo, 1976; Ramsden, 1992; Ramsden, Beswick, & Bowden, 1989; Saljo, 1979). But let us start from the beginning.

The first task set by the facilitator was to identify our 'teaching perspective' by means of doing the electronic survey devised by Pratt and Collins (2001). Through this process, we could focus our attention more effectively on what we wanted to achieve in our curricula. While I was not surprised to find out that I am a 'Social Reformer' – I have been trained as a sociologist – the way in which this perspective was described on the website made me reflect more purposely on my contribution to the BBM as a *sociologist-teaching-in-a-school-of-management*. In this capacity, I should endeavour to train 'reflective practitioners', preparing my students to recognise that their technical expertise as professional managers is 'embedded in a context of meanings' (Schon, 1983, p. 295), and that they should be equipped with the ability to reflect intelligently in order to find out what these meanings are. I should be designing pedagogical activities more specifically geared to encourage my students to learn how to *reflect-in-action* (Schon, 1983); that is, to be able to 'think on their feet' in order to deal with situations of uncertainty, instability and value conflict.

The insights arising from reflection on my teaching perspective were to play a critical role in the revision of the learning outcomes of the two subjects I re-designed during the Project, which now also place a more explicit emphasis on the development of

reflection and critical thinking skills. Below I recount in some detail how this happened.

'Aha' Moments and New Knowledge

In preparation for our third meeting, the facilitator set two tasks: the first was to ensure that we had a sound grasp of the notion of *learning outcomes*, by reading two texts: a chapter by Biggs (2004, pp. 34-55) entitled 'Formulating and clarifying curriculum objectives', and an article by Allan (1996) entitled 'Learning outcomes in higher education'. The second preparatory task was to fill out a special template designed for the purpose of mapping out the subject's existing learning outcomes and assessments. In order to 'save time', I decided to do the template before I read the articles, and to this end I cut and pasted the list below, from an electronic copy of the PPK outline,ⁱ into the section of the template headed 'Existing Learning Outcomes':

At the completion of the subject, students should be able to have a sound grasp of:

- the main theories of power, and how they can account for a range of phenomena in organisational settings and in society as a whole;
- the link between language and power;
- the nature and operation of intra-organisational *power* and *politics*;
- the link between gender and power in organisational settings;
- organisational phenomena arising from the intersection between *power* and *knowledge*;
- the implications of the exercise of power at a global level;

It was not until I finished reading the two prescribed texts on learning outcomes, and reflected about what I had read, that I realised that I had badly 'outsmarted' myself when I tried to save time by cutting and pasting the above list. It became evident that the list was not about learning outcomes, but it merely described the constituent topics of the subject. Hence, I had no other choice but to ditch that list and start from scratch, in order to formulate proper learning outcomes for PPK. I used Biggs'(2004, pp. 39-48) Structure of Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy, bearing in mind that my learning outcomes should address the needs of third year students, and should thus be framed accordingly to foster deeper 'levels of learning'. It was desirable to aim for what Biggs (2004, pp. 35-55) calls the 'extended abstract involvement', where the 'coherent whole is conceptualised at a higher level of abstraction and is applied to new and broader domains'. I made sure that I phrased the new outcomes with 'higher order verbs' to reflect more accurately what I expected to achieve in my teaching. The new learning outcomes stated:

At the completion of PPK students should be able to:

1. **explain** the links between *power*, *politics* and *knowledge*;

2. **critically appraise** various classical and contemporary theories of power;
3. **apply** elements of various theories of power to organisational events;
4. **explain** the operation of power at micro- and macro levels;
5. **analyse** patterns of distribution and operation of power in organisational settings;
6. **reflect** on the importance of using power ethically in organisational settings.'

At the following Project meeting, I remember dreading the moment when we would be invited by the facilitator to discuss our existing learning outcomes. There was no way 'out of it'. I would have to reveal to my colleagues that until a few days ago I did not fully understand the meaning of 'learning outcomes'. However, as we were doing the 'rounds' discussing our homework, I was relieved to find out that I was not on my own: many of my colleagues had gone through a similar process of discovery, as they did their homework.

At this meeting, we were also asked to reflect on our existing methods of assessment, in order to determine whether they appropriately addressed our revised learning outcomes. Once more we benefited from the wisdom of Biggs (2004, pp. 11-33), as our conceptual tool in this exercise was his notion of *constructive alignment*. Constructive alignment is based on the assumption that teaching for effective learning should be 'a balanced system in which all components support each other, as they do in any ecosystem'(Biggs, 2004, pp. 26-27). The teaching methods must be designed to fulfill the learning outcomes – in other words, students must be asked to do exactly what is prescribed in the learning outcomes. This will enable the teacher to test whether her teaching was effective. As summed up by Biggs (2004, p. 27), 'All components in the system address the same agenda and support each other'. This exercise was extremely beneficial to me, and gave me a very satisfying feeling of equilibrium in my teaching practices.

Shifting to Blended Learning

A major outcome of the Project was the discovery of the pedagogical benefits of *blended learning* as a flexible mode of delivery. Albeit daunted by the challenges associated with the shift from face-to-face to blended learning delivery, I decided to make the move. The preparation of my subjects for blended learning delivery was nevertheless more onerous than I thought. I had to do intensive training on WebCT advanced skills; familiarise myself with basic e-moderation skills; engage in numerous telephone consultations with Helpdesk staff; elaborate suitable questions for the planned online discussion forums; design special rubrics for the online assessment components; create scaffolding exercises for online activities, and write instructions for the online sessions for both students and sessional staff. But I felt confident that I had made the right decision and looked forward to implementing the changes.

At the conclusion of the Redevelopment Project, I experienced a strong feeling of accomplishment. Through reflection on the best ways to foster critical thinking skills in my students, I realised that I had begun to use critical reflection myself as a tool for my own personal and professional development (Brookfield, 1995). While I have always been a conscientious and creative teacher, it was only through critical reflection that I became aware of my own uncritical stance in a number of teaching

and learning areas, and felt committed to look at them anew. I had gone through what Mezirow (1990) called a 'transformative learning' experience.

Reality Check: Implementing the Changes

I remember feeling flattered in the final stages of the Project when the facilitator referred to me as an 'early adopter'ⁱⁱⁱ (Rogers, 1995) of blended learning in our group. However, as prestigious as being an early adopter may be, it posed a major problem to me: as no one else in our group had used blended learning, there were no role models to follow; there was no one to warn me about the challenges I was about to confront in the implementation phase.

One of the main challenges in this new phase of the journey was the additional time pressures introduced by the shift to blended learning, which meant often working in the evenings and on weekends to ensure that everything was done on time. In addition to tasks such as maintaining students regularly informed on the Noticeboard about online activities and responding to a constant flow of enquiries and uploading teaching materials on the WebCT, I was required to take additional training to learn the more advanced functions of the technology.

I also had to come to terms with how naïve a user of WebCT I was prior to the Project. My greatest *faux pas* was trying to run a synchronous discussion on the Noticeboard with all of my 242 CMI students at once! Needless to say that our first online session was extremely chaotic, not only due to the volume of responses, but also because of the impossibility to keep up with the discussion threads. Once more, this poor 'early adopter' did not have anyone to warn her that synchronous discussions can only be effective when carried out in small groups of 8 students or so. So, I had to quickly create 31 small groups for the next online discussion forum. I remember having to devote a few hours to this task, outside working hours, as my workload allowance was not sufficient to cover all these new tasks that emerged from the shift to blended learning. Not surprisingly, mistakes occurred.

On the eve of the following online forums, there was an incident that created a great deal of anxiety and dissatisfaction among my students. As I recounted in the reflective journal that I kept during the Project:

Yesterday was Sunday, and I shouldn't have done any university work, but following a compelling gut feeling at the end of the afternoon, I decided to check my emails – and, low and behold, there were 7 emails from anxious PPK students who couldn't see their names in the discussion groups. This morning, another 12 angst emails came through, with the same problem! It's nearly 4pm, and since 8:00 am I've done nothing else than placing students

in groups (with that extremely clunky technology, which I loath!) and letting them know which group they've been allocated to! Have contacted the Helpdesk about this matter and was told that the reason for this could be that when I created the groups, these students faced encumbrance and therefore were blocked. It could be that since then, they have regularized their situation and have been given access. But I'm finding it hard to believe that 19 out of 242 students, nearly 10%, had encumbrance problems... (19.3.07)

Eventually I realised that in my fatigued state, I had failed to press the 'Update' button, when I uploaded a spreadsheet with the class list. This meant that a whole class 'disappeared' in the process – those poor 19 students who had tried to contact me during the weekend! Re-uploading the spreadsheets with the class list was complex and time-consuming, and I finished the task only a few minutes before the discussions were due to start.

I also experienced hurdles arising from lack of training for sessional staff. One of my tutors rang me in a panicked state, a few minutes after the online session was supposed to start, to tell me that he could not work out how to access the discussion groups. After a while, I figured out that he was trying to access the discussions from the wrong location in WebCT. By the time I helped him to upload a greeting message with the instructions for the forum plus the discussion questions, more than one-third of the students had already logged off, assuming that the discussions were not going to happen. My heart sank when I noticed that one of these students had typed before logging off: 'This is one of the most disorganised subjects that I've ever done!!'

Not surprisingly, the online forums were not favourably evaluated in a 'fast feedback' survey (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 123) which I ran half-way through the session. The complaints referred to familiar 'sins' such as poor coordination of student placement in the small discussion groups; unclear instructions for the online forums, and what they saw as 'lack of punctuality of teaching staff'. I also noticed that my overall rating in the official Student Feedback on Unit (SFU) at the end of the semester declined by two points. After putting so much work into the online sessions, I felt pretty devastated by the negative evaluations from the students. However, after reading Bass's (1999, p. 3) description of his own experience with the shift to blended learning, I felt more resigned:

Three years ago, after introducing a number of experimental "electronic literacy" components into my courses, my teaching evaluations plummeted. I know now that this is not too uncommon when teachers significantly revise their teaching, especially involving educational technology.

I also found some consolation in the work of Laurillard (1993) which sensitizes the reader to the difficulties associated with the first execution of an e-learning program.

It would be erroneous, nevertheless, to view my first experience with blended learning as a 'failure'. Despite the stressful moments and mishaps, I could see that there was something positive happening with my students' learning processes. There was, for example, an obvious improvement in their reflection and critical thinking skills. The excerpt below from my journal, which comments on one of the online sessions in CMI, attests to this:

In general, the standard of online responses was pretty good, and I was happy to see a little bit more reflection and critical thinking than in responses given in class. It was also very positive to “hear the voice” of shyer students who do not normally contribute in class discussions. I was happy to see that students were making use of prescribed readings, and was surprised to see some of them participating with multiple responses (20.10.2006).

For this *sociologist-teaching-in-the-school-of-management* this increased level of reflection and critical thinking had been a significant accomplishment, in that it was consistent with the new learning outcomes which I had designed for this subject.

Issue Emerging from the Journey

At this point of the autoethnography, the neophyte pedagogue adopts a more analytic perspective in order to consider some broader issues that emerged from her journey of discovery. The focus shifts from the *personal* to the *institutional*, in order to establish a link between micro and macro contexts. While my lack of familiarity with the virtual learning environment was no doubt a factor that prevented me from having a smoother transition from face-to-face to blended learning delivery, there were other factors that were beyond my control.

A critically important issue that emerged from my experience is the time pressures created by the shift to blended learning. As mentioned earlier, I found myself working in the interstices of my time in order to cope with the additional time demands engendered by this new mode of delivery. This issue has been acknowledged in a recent study carried out by Lefoe and Hedberg (2006, p. 334) which identified ‘increased workloads in the blended learning context’ at the University of Wollongong, Australia, not only for tutors and subject coordinators, but also for students. In their words, ‘Time needs to be provided for knowledge generation and planning activities, not just the servicing of students’ immediate learning needs’. Achieving the right balance in the blended learning environment thus remains a significant challenge.

Another issue that emerged is the need for technological training for sessional staff. As recounted above, the delivery of the online component of my units was negatively affected by an inadequate level of technological skills among my sessional staff. Not only should training programs provide sessional tutors with knowledge on the technology and management procedures, but they should also raise their awareness of current teaching practice and debates about the uses of technology in teaching, and develop formative evaluation skills, so that they can monitor and improve their use of it (Laurillard, 1993). My experience also indicated that there needs to be more systematic training for students with regard to the requirements of e-learning. It should not be assumed that because they come from the ‘computer generation’ they automatically know what is required of them in the virtual learning environment.

In my journey I also encountered some frustrating bureaucratic obstacles which were clearly at odds with good pedagogical practice. One example was my failed attempt to include two questions in the University's Student Feedback on Unit (SFU) form, especially designed to obtain feedback on the students' experience with the virtual learning environment. When I contacted the division responsible for the formal students' evaluations to request the inclusion of these additional questions, I was told that changes to the existing feedback questionnaire could take up to one year to be implemented, due to the various steps of approvals required in the thick bureaucracy of the University. This *contretemps* shows the need for greater institutional flexibility at a time of rapid change, in order to ensure a more effective monitoring and evaluation of the processes involved. It also leads to the next issue, which is perhaps the most important lesson learned retrospectively from my autoethnography; the importance of systematic institutional support in the shift to blended learning (Graham, 2006; Ross & Gage, 2006).

While the rhetoric of blended learning is beginning to figure more prominently in the official texts of the University, and WebCT technology has been adopted by a growing number of academics, there is not yet an institutional strategy for a general, systematically coordinated and monitored shift to blended learning. These changes cannot occur without considerable institutional adjustments that will establish a comprehensive organisational infrastructure to support it. And this goes beyond just providing up-to-date technology, but should include 'mechanisms that are capable of monitoring, learning and changing' (Laurillard, 1993, p. 225). There is a need to gather quantitative and qualitative data during the process of implementing blended learning, for a proactive measurement of learning effectiveness (Ross & Gage, 2006, pp. 162-167). Hence, an 'enterprise approach' to blended learning is required, which means that rather than having a few 'early adopters' learning about teaching in the virtual environment haphazardly through trial and error, there must be appropriate institutional processes in place for a regular cycle of measurement, analysis and adjustments, designed to continuously improve the quality of delivery.

Conclusion

Borrowing from the autoethnographic style of writing, this essay recounted my experience as the participant in a professional development project which was a catalyst for a profound change in the self as a teacher. Not only did this experience provide me with valuable theoretical knowledge and skills, but it also engendered an enduring commitment to good SoTL. It also enabled me to reflect on the constraints posed on pedagogical practices by institutional factors, and the need for a comprehensive organisational infrastructure to support changes such as the shift to a blended learning mode of delivery.

Most importantly, my autoethnography made salient the importance of reflective practice in teaching – or the ability to identify and scrutinize the underlying assumptions on the way we teach. It demonstrated how intelligent reflection led me to view my practice as a teacher through a different set of lenses, transforming me into a *learner* (Brookfield, 1995, pp. xii-xiii). Through this metamorphosis I became 'the other', which in turn prompted me to appraise my experience more critically from *the other side of the mirror* (Brookfield, 1995, pp. 29-30). This process has enabled me to better empathise with my students – to understand how they learn –

which has empowered me to respond more appropriately in future situations. Biggs (2004, p. 7) made a crucially important point when he wrote: 'Learning new techniques for teaching is like fish that provides a meal today; reflective practice is the net that provides meals for the rest of your life.'

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ⁱ At UWS, the document distributed to students at the beginning of session with detailed information about the subject is called 'unit outline'.

ⁱⁱ Here the facilitator was referring to the influential framework proposed by Rogers to ascertain degrees to which technology is adopted, or not, according to how it appeals to five groups: *Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority* and *Laggards*.