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Five years after

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FIVE YEARS AFTER
Constructing a robust teacher identity through autoethnography as professional development

Brian Andrew Benoit

Introduction

I am sitting in my home office when I receive an email from the university management I have taught at. I am not teaching at the university at this point so I am wondering what the message could be about? A few weeks ago I had received my student evaluations from a course I had taught in a new department at another institution in which a few comments that were made by a student had negatively affected me. In my professional journal I had debated the necessity of processing the negative comments in relation to the positive ones. Anyone that has been in the classroom recently can relate to the feeling of focusing on the few negative comments despite evidence to the contrary. Could this email be another one, which will only reinforce the fears of inadequacy or unworthiness? Although I have only been looking at the email for a short while it seems like an eternity has passed. I read the email but cannot comprehend what I have read. I scan through the email again and can make out only a few words, but I am still reluctant to read it thoroughly. At this point I am taken aback and uncomfortable. As a grade school teacher with more than fifteen years of classroom teaching I am not used to immediate feedback regarding student progress … 

(30 March 2021)

Student evaluations in university are often seen by faculty as a necessary evil, needed as part of the research, service, and teaching portfolio traditionally required for tenure. For those who have already achieved tenure, they can serve as an informal survey of what went well and what could be improved. For contract/part-time faculty such as myself, these evaluations can have harsh effects on their employability due to the precarious nature of the often non-existent job security. Over the last five years, I have taught at three universities across six different departments, each with their different approach to the importance of student evaluations. This reflection is not focused on the process of evaluations or the unstable nature of part-time faculty, but rather on what effect, if any, these evaluations and my writings based on them (as artefacts) have had on my own teaching. What role can autoethnography play in using these
artefacts as well as my own professional journals to critique my professional practice, cultural beliefs, and experiences? The act of going back will allow me to understand my contemporary self in order to improve my future teaching. Emotions and memories that are derived from this type of study can be considered useful data (Poulos, 2021) and seen as both research and product (Chang, 2021).

In this chapter, I look at how teachers can use memory triggers to draw upon autobiography, autoethnography, and memory-work to help develop and examine their place in terms of the space they inhabit. What do the memories associated with our individual journeys teach us about ourselves? How have the relationships between knowledge and education, power and society, as well as the social policies relating to education and diversity influenced the development of the concept of my professional identity and how has this affected my teaching? Identifying and incorporating memory as pedagogy, through the employment of autoethnographic narratives, plays on the symbiotic relationship between the process and product which allows for the incorporation of one’s own voice within the research (Benoit, 2016).

Positioning the study

Throughout my doctoral studies I had received letters and messages from my former grade school students, now successful adults in their own right, but this was the first time that I had received feedback right after the end of a course. As Herrman (2017) explains, autoethnographers purposely bring the personal back into the conversation to replace canonical theories and methods that predominate in many domains. What are the central events that have shaped my personal and academic worldview? How can I, as an observer in my own world, use the ordinary and mundane such as teacher evaluations to make the ordinary into the extraordinary (Poulos, 2021)?

25 June 2016

I have finally submitted my doctoral work and it was accepted with no need for any revisions; apparently this is rare at my institution. Where do I go from now? What will I do next? Do I focus on academia? I enjoy teaching in schools so much? Is there a middle road? Can I do both? I have to begin looking for positions, many are far away from my city, should I apply, should I take them? Where can I apply my work and were will my research have the greatest effect?

This chapter is not intended to be a direct criticism of the process or consequences of teaching evaluations or any of the universities I have worked at. I acknowledge that schooling is inherently political (Giroux, 2011). In fact, some of the writing pieces have been altered to hide the identity of the courses, the students, and institutions. It is an attempt to provide a forum in which dialogue can improve my professional practice. As a seasoned public schoolteacher, I have had to accept certain foundational ideas. Schooling, as mentioned above, is a political machine that has the ability to do lots of harm under the guise of common sense and good pedagogy. I am particularly interested in the possibilities autoethnography can provide teacher researchers to improve their personal and professional practice while simultaneously improving student learning. Although I do not use the third person, this study is a type of realist autoethnography as I am using the teacher’s (mine) and students’ perspectives (Adams et al., 2015).
Methodology

Similarly to Ellis (2008), I start with field notes, organise them chronologically, and then examine how I felt about them, which attaches meaning to them as opposed to absolute facts. The use of journals as memory texts has been successful in studying the interplay of past, present, and future in relation to teacher and teacher educator development (Mitchell, 2005).

First, over the period of a week I reread my teaching evaluations between 2016 and 2021, focusing on the student’s comments as they are generally the sections of the course evaluations that have the most information. I then spent a week reading through the entries in my professional teaching journal from the time periods that corresponded with the dates I received the results of the evaluations from the university (1–2 months following the end of each semester). The teaching evaluations range from courses I taught to undergraduate and graduate students and covered several different course types. I then focused on the course evaluations that were referenced in my journals. In returning to experiences that occurred within the classroom between 2016 and 2021, I can focus on certain events in new ways, evoke stories that can become more accessible, and facilitate reflexivity in research design (Weber, 2014). As a form of autoethnography, this process allows me to produce a more extended understanding of my teacher persona which serves to help diagnose the needs of my future students so that I may better connect with my pedagogical strategies and goals (Kincheloe et al., 2004).

Memory triggers: working with teaching evaluations and professional journals as texts

Guided by the increased appreciation of the study of teachers’ lives through autoethnography as a way to gain insight into the learning process, I used the teaching evaluations and my writings about them as memory triggers which permitted me to look deeper into the issues of pedagogies, positionality, and power.

Increasingly, there are several studies that look at teacher reflections of their teaching through reflective journals. I decided to use my professional teaching journals to revisit events and memories related to my teaching as Claudia Mitchell (2005) had done in an essay called “In My Own Handwriting” in which she went back over a series of journals and diary entries from 1971 to 1975 written during her first years of teaching in a small fishing village in Nova Scotia. She comments almost 30 years later that the journal entries, written almost every day, combine teaching and everything else she was doing at the time. As she observed, returning to her teaching texts helped her “focus on various constructions of a truth, and the ways in which reading back becomes a form of reading, and its own form of self-study” (p. 117). Similarly, researcher Annette Oberg (2004) outlines a process in which she spontaneously went through her own informal journals (similar to what I had done) written over the previous 15 years, noting the passages that stood out for her in order to then reflect upon them. The process she implemented ensured that she continuously paid attention to the process of engagement.
As she puts it, “I have come to describe my teaching and the researching of my teaching as a practice of opening, paying attention, and not knowing” (p. 241). Since the completion of my doctoral studies, how has my autoethnography supported my professional development and what role do teaching evaluations and my journal writing play in it?

**Memory trigger 1**

“Dr. Benoit is knowledgable [sic] but he tells too many stories about his classroom experiences, needed to listen more to our concerns”.

**25 January 2017**

Upon receiving the results from the Fall courses I am left both satisfied to have received them but confused as to the results of them. Most students enjoy the experiences I share with them, as I am in the classroom every day, what can I do to provide them with contemporary experiences while also focusing on the theory? Isn’t theory and pedagogy both important for future students to grasp as they prepare for their teaching practicums? I allowed the students to express themselves at several times in groups, in conferences, with guest speakers and through the assignments, what more could I do to provide them with a voice?

Having just completed my doctoral work I was lucky to have been assigned three courses to teach during the fall semester of 2016. Throughout the semester, I had worked hard to ensure that I provided a balanced approach to my teaching so that the students in each class could be given the tools needed to prosper in the classrooms. In this class of about 40 students, comments related to my storytelling as a pedagogical tool were brought up. Returning to my notes from that time, I remember trying to balance the comments from students who enjoyed the supporting discussions I provided from my own fieldwork to the students that pointed it out as a negative. Early thoughts of inadequacies were flamed by this one comment, even though it was outnumbered and contradicted by the vast majority of comments. Why had I not written about the positive comments or the students that thanked me for listening to them and providing specific feedback to them in class and via assignment comments? Some have argued that higher education professors are increasingly involved in the socialisation of young people, and that the student population is now in need of recognition and validation (Furedi, 2017). My classes are designed in such a way that I create a classroom where different types of curricula are presented, and students are encouraged to take what they can to assimilate it to their own ways of knowing and thinking. Similarly to Ellis and Bochner (1996), who “promote the idea of plural text, open to many interpretations” (p. 15), my courses rely not just on one text or story but also on the culmination of what everyone brings to the classroom. Tilley-Lubbs (2011, 2021), in her autoethnographical research, evaluates her positioning and repositioning of the self in relation to moving between two different classes. In her work she notes through narrative there is “[m]ore social inequality just disguised a little better” (p. 712).

**Memory trigger 2**

“Dr. Benoit can balance the content between Chinese and Canadian contexts which makes it easier for Chinese students to learn the course content”.

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27 February 2017

I am glad that students felt that my approach to the course took into consideration the students’ cultural background. I wonder what parts of the course was most helpful to them? What can I do better? I wonder if I will get a chance to teach this course again. I wonder if the students will remember the basic tenants of the course in the future? Will I see them again? I never thought of my teaching as balancing between cultures but looking back I guess I did? Did I really bridge the gap between cultures? What a fun course it was!

This was a special topics course I was hired to teach in which I could incorporate my research in critical autoethnography. The students in this class were mostly from mainland China, which I had not expected. I was at first concerned that my approach to the course would not translate well. Engaging in autoethnographic research in and around the classrooms not only allows for the extension of ways of knowing and thinking but also provides us with a greater appreciation of these very stories, whether they be our own or our students’ (Tombro, 2016). I remember feeling overwhelmed when students asked questions and I worried I would not have the answer. As a professor I try to provide an outlet for students to share their concerns during class, but I am also aware of the power dynamics that exist. I provide students with questions that encourage them to go on a journey to obtain different perspectives and different ways of seeing things that might not be immediately familiar to them. I attempt to put social justice in context to demonstrate how different social structures convalesce around issues of class, race, gender etc. I carry the notion I gained from a former professor and mentor of mine that many who develop pedagogies are unconscious of the political inscriptions embedded in them (Kincheloe, 2008). Did I really balance the curriculum, or did I focus on western notions and have the students think I was being sensitive to their ways of knowing? Was the comment actually helpful in providing me with concrete feedback on my pedagogical approach to teaching the course? Did I really take my students’ concerns into consideration?

Memory trigger 3

“More work done in class would’ve been helpful. I learn by doing, not through lectures. I need examples and practice. Team teaching for subjects/topics would help keep students engaged, and perhaps could smile more”.

15 June 2017

How could this student have such a narrow interpretation of what the course was about? This was an intensive course and every student needed to show up in order to get the most out of it. I gave a lot of class time in order to work on assignments and create student groups which I checked into several times. If there is a comment that students have made is that I often use my sense of humour to make sometimes-tedious topics enjoyable. Why should I be asked to smile more? When did I not smile? Was it a class during the weeks that mom was in the hospital and almost died? I let the students know I was going through a difficult time. How could this be allowed to be added to the course evaluations?
This journal entry made me revisit a conversation I had with a fellow part-time professor in a teacher lounge one evening before a class. I had mentioned that I was concerned about a few comments that were made on my evaluation about my smiling. She has several years of experience teaching part time and just said: “get used to it and don’t let it bother you”. I was taken aback and asked her why she would say this. She then went on to mention that over the years students have criticised the way she dresses and carries herself. She mentioned that it was a common practice for students to be more critical of their female cis-gendered teachers and those from visible minorities. It was an inevitability that she had gotten used to. The fact that she was an expert in her field with a great reputation did not matter and she reported that on a few occasions she was even asked to meet with university administrators to explain the results of the student evaluations. Although referring to government policy in her work, Miller (1996) uses narrative work to expose their sometimes (negative) effects on (female) teacher autonomy. I had been aware of the discrepancies around the differing treatment of gender in other domains but had not envisioned it extended to the ivory tower. Autoethnographic research can aid in countering the culture of corporate managerialism in higher education which is increasingly prevalent (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021), but what role were these evaluations really taking in the process?

Memory trigger 4

“The Teaching Assistant couldn’t access the class website which meant we could not get our grades on time, but the teacher was very helpful”.

13 February 2019

I still cannot understand how a university could not take the students’ concerns more seriously. Beside the fact that the salary of a TA at this university is low, I had to ask a colleague to intervene and agree to take the position. I did everything I could to give them access to the university's portal to be able to correct student work as well as provide appropriate feedback. Universities are often touting how they are student focused but it does not make sense that I have to be the one to advocate for them alone. Because of these delays students felt that feedback was not given quick enough despite my interventions. Why could they have dragged their heels so much in getting my TA credentials?

This entry is of particular interest to me, especially in the current political climate. More specifically, there have been a series of debates into the role of the state in regulating religious wear for public servants. This culminated in a secularism law (Bill 21) enacted by the Province of Quebec. As part of this law, new teachers to the profession are barred from working if they wear a religious symbol (as defined by the government). The law was deemed as a way to ensure secularism and respect of Quebec values. As noted by Noël (1994), “the oppressor often seeks to hide himself behind the veil of humanity by professing to be the defender of rights, but these rights are often discriminatory in the first place” (p. 52). The person that I had chosen for the TA position had a name that was easily identifiable as being part of a religious minority. After reflecting on the situation, I remembered that the reason given for the delay in the TA’s access was because their name was spelled incorrectly and this blocked them from accessing the portal. How could so many emails and conversations to different people have
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not made the university notice that the name was spelled incorrectly by them despite being submitted correctly? Was there something more at play? Since my students were also aware of this situation, were they indirect witnesses to a type of hidden discrimination? Had I acted correctly by keeping my students informed of the issues brought forth with the university and my TA throughout the process? One of the methods to achieve this goal is to be periodically kept up to date with the constantly growing wealth of teaching pedagogy as well as keeping a record of one’s own progress. More importantly, it is important that the teacher remember not to fall into the trap of feeling like their own background is necessary when teaching about a subject they might be close to; rather they should have an understanding of the background and how it affects their reality. Teachers often underestimate the relevance of their own stories but provide some of this information about themselves to their students without realising it. Mary Louise Pratt’s argument that autoethnographies are forms of writing that address both the writer's own group and a wider, more dominant one “Texts … that are autoethnographic assert alternative forms of meaning and power from those associated with the dominant metropolitan culture” (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 8). In this case, students were denied a service, and although this might have nothing to do with the TA, it does speak to the hidden biases that exist below the surface of major institutions. What has this taught me? How can I use this situation to improve my practice?

Memory trigger 5

“I refused to answer this question, how are Indigenous issues separate from other issues”?

15 June 2020

What a great question to ask on an evaluation form. I wonder which of the students wrote this. I have my suspicions based on our class discussions. I am quite impressed that the course on Inclusion in schools got one of the students to question the university’s language on their official form. I will have to send an email to the director and mention this to him, perhaps the question could be refined to take into account what was said. I wonder if other universities use this type of question when professors are teaching to [I]ndigenous communities?

I have had the opportunity to teach in Indigenous communities across Quebec. As part of the teaching evaluations there was a question on the teaching evaluations that read: “The instructor was sensitive to [I]ndigenous issues”. Up to that point I had never given it a second thought until I read the question from the students. As someone that is committed to critical pedagogy, I was surprised that the student developed a strong sense of conscientização, learning to perceive social, political, and economical contradictions and learning to act against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Whether I am teaching a class on campus or in Indigenous communities, I use what I learned through critical pedagogy to incorporate etymology, pattern, process, and contextualisation to analyse several parts of thinking. I want my students to be in a position to incorporate my teaching into their own Weltanschauung or worldview. Cultural consciousness/subjectivity involves the ability to decipher not just the world as we see it but also the elements that shape what we observe and why. Cultural, social,
and ideological differences become important in developing a profound sense of rigorous transgressive educational purpose. I strive to provide my students’ social consciousness with tools necessary to develop a critical cultural awareness of education. Pepi Leistyna (1999) calls this evolving awareness presence of mind (p. 14). Part of attaining this presence of mind is the ability to address how knowledge is related to the social discourses that are expected of students.

Memory Trigger 6

“The method used on our midterm does not line up with my values as a future teacher and doesn’t appropriately measure the depth of understanding of the student. On the second portion of the exam I only received a grade and no comment, professor needs to give consideration that some students might have failed this course in the past.”

20 February 2021

How could this student criticize me for not providing comments for a part of an exam that is true or false? I gave feedback on every other assignment of this course and ensured that the students had the opportunity to ask me for extra help. I also provided study guides. I already took into consideration the students concerns regarding the mid-term as it had to be online rather than in person due to the global pandemic. In addition, this course is usually taught by an established faculty member and I had to ensure that I followed the general outline. I think I know who this student is because they sort of identified themselves in the text – but what’s the point? How can the student have been allowed to write so much, especially since it is not productive? Why could they not have just come to me, was I not open enough? Do I need to focus on making a better impression on them? Did I ignore their possible requests for help?

During the pandemic, I had the opportunity to teach a course which had been taught by a full-time faculty member. Despite having worked as a teaching assistant for a similar course several times in the recent past, I was instructed to follow a similar path as the teacher to ensure consistency. I remember thinking that the course’s format might not be the best for the conditions surrounding pandemic teaching. Students were expected to memorise some central components to the course so that they would be able to apply what was learned in class discussions and the course presentations. As an educator, I adhere to Dewey’s emphasis on knowing the students well in order to be able to reach them (1938). I had difficulty in gauging student reaction to my teaching through the online software. The majority of students would leave their cameras off to the point that I sometimes felt like I was talking with myself. My journal entry does not adequately reflect how bad the comment made me feel. I remember feeling concerned for the mental state of some of my students who found themselves increasingly isolated. I made a point to reach out to the university’s resources to provide students with help should they need it. I was open with the students about the need to use assessment tools that I might not traditionally use but the department requested certain elements be present. The course was a requirement for teacher certification and as such the government sanctioning bodies expected certain objectives be met. A number of questions arise: what is the Ministry of Education’s role in the establishment of positivist ideologies? How do I position myself within my research as a teacher researcher? What role can critical autoethnography play in the promotion of a more socially just school system and how might this affect my professional practice?
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I attempted to scaffold the students’ learning by providing individualised study guides, practice questions, and class review sessions and debates. When students missed more than one class I would contact them to inquire into their wellbeing. This student’s comment was part of a larger narrative that they wrote in the evaluation. What the student chose to write says a lot about how they conceptualise themselves, as they are not static entities (Fivush & Haden, 2003) and neither am I. Although I had to teach the cannons, I taught them critically and hoped the students would be able to form their own ideas. Moving forward, I need to continue to reflect upon how the students perceive my teaching in order to improve their learning.

Looking ahead

My doctoral work had provided me with powerful tools, which allowed me to Unpack the Curriculum. It further allowed me to address the development of my own ethnography as it related to professional self-conscious reflexivity, compelling me to address questions such as what is the government’s role in the establishment of positivist ideologies? It is important to look at reflexivity and voice surrounding text with the main goal of framing one’s knowledge and understanding of its impact on my own development as a researcher/educator while ensuring that this development is an ongoing process. Hence the need to periodically “look back” in order to move forward. I think about Ellis and Bochner (1996), who discuss the need to promote the idea of a plural text which should be open to different interpretations as opposed to a fixed one.

I used the course evaluations and my writings about them as a springboard to elaborate on issues of privilege, voice, social inequality, and social action in schools. I also describe how particular academics, experiences, and policies as well as hidden curricula have created the interpretive paradigms that have led me towards autoethnography as my main strategy for inquiry into my teacher practice and, ultimately, a more just society.

Assessing autoethnography

When engaged in autoethnography, several concerns come to mind regarding rigour, validity, and trustworthiness. How can the research that I am undertaking into my teaching practice be of benefit to others? What application do my personal stories and experiences, as well as their subsequent analysis, have within the realm of teacher education? Autoethnography allows for the examining and learning about our practice while simultaneously developing opportunities for exploring scholarship in and through teaching (Loughran, 2004). As mentioned in the introduction to this section, in qualitative research there needs to be some way of assessing its truth value. It was essential for me to look at how others have talked about assessing autoethnography.

I used two memory sites as memory triggers (teaching evaluations and my professional teaching journal) in the process of engaging in what I have developed and called critical autoethnography. This was scaffolded by Mokhele’s (2014) criteria for examining self-study action research projects which is set in a South African context and draws on the work of Samaras (2011) and Mitchell’s (2016) five criteria for assessing autoethnography, which in turn builds on the work of Adams et al. (2013).

Conclusion

Using autoethnography to retrieve and reflect upon our memories as well as contemporary thoughts and feelings connected to them can be very helpful to who we are and who we will eventually become. An underpinning theme of my research is the development and
understanding of my concept of self and using teacher evaluations as memory triggers to re-examine our memories. This allows us to reconceptualise ourselves which can provide a positive effect on other stakeholders (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014).

This exercise has allowed me to uncover ways in which power operates in our classrooms. This study is as much about the process as about the product. The act of going back allowed me to understand my contemporary self so as to improve my future teaching. As I sit here in my office re-reading my notes, journals, and readings, I came to the realisation that in just a few days I will be sent back into the classroom. My future elementary school and university students will be waiting for me, hoping I can help them get through their schooling with the support and guidance they require. Norman Denzin (2021) warns us that new challenges exist going forward as universities find themselves assailed by corporate managerial processes, but, as demonstrated, teachers have both the academic and teacher knowledge founded on the understanding that the stories we tell are as important as the events and facts that make them personal and real to us (Benoit, 2016). Going back can bring both positive and negative episodes from our past to light. Teachers who take the time to reflect on their memories cannot only improve their professional practice; they can also arm themselves with the contextual foundation they need to shape their own realities. Understanding teacher's lives is central to understanding students' learning and autoethnography can act as the medium to strengthen teaching leading to a more humane world. Autoethnography as a form of teacher orientation can act as a bridge between the challenges of everyday classroom realities and a more just world by providing teachers with the tools needed to change the system. How can I learn from this? What can I do to improve my teaching?

Finally, I get the courage to open the document: “Dear Dr. Benoit, I am happy to announce that you have been awarded the 2020 prize for Contract Faculty in the School of Education. Congratulations!” (Chair of Awards, personal communication, 30 March, 2021).

References
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