

A JOURNEY IN LEARNING AND TEACHING DRAMA: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF SELF AND BEYOND

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Introduction

Reflecting on lived experiences and recalling memories from the past has recently gained recognition in qualitative research because it “goes beyond the writing of selves.” (Denshire 2010: 2). The purpose of this self-study is to make salient my experience in learning and teaching drama and its impact on the formation of my identity using autoethnography and incorporating poetic inquiry and narrative reflection as a creative art-based approach (Prendergast & Leggo 2007).

This paper is organised into five sections. I begin by discussing the use of autoethnography in qualitative research. I attempt to approach this research using evocative autoethnography as reflexive methodology where I am the researcher and the subject of the research. I consider the use of poetry as a creative method of inquiry in conjunction with narrative reflections to present data and reflect on my lived experience in learning drama and teaching English through drama. After that, I vividly reflect on my first experience with drama in education and theatre. I then shed light on my experience in doing drama with school pupils and pre-service teachers at university level. In the concluding section, the lived experiences are discussed and interpreted and final interpretations presented.

Autoethnography as a method of inquiry and identity construction

The importance of autoethnography as a research method is that it allows the production of new small-scale knowledge about a unique situated researcher. What also distinguishes the autoethnographic method is that it helps to genuinely address unanswered questions through the inclusion of the ideas of the researcher, sharing personal experience and understanding the researcher’s cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Chang (2012) describes autoethnography as “research- friendly” and indicates that it has been used as a research tool by practitioners, educators, researchers and professionals in various fields (p.52). The familiarity of the ethnographer with his or her research data is another key characteristic of the ethnographic research method.

Being the source of the research data not only helps the ethnographer best reflect on his or her practices, but also it guarantees reader's engagement and involvement. Nash (2004) contends that the freedom of the autoethnographic method liberates the researcher from abstract writings and informs reader's experiences. In other words, the power of the personal narrative is that it helps understand the self in connection to others. Another benefit of using autoethnography as a research inquiry is self-transformation and self-empowerment. Reading and sharing autoethnographies may help readers and ethnographers to become more self-reflective and/or it may change their perspectives and understanding of themselves and others (Nieto 2004; Greene 2000).

Despite the growing interest in autoethnography as a research method, it has been subject to criticism. Anderson (2006) and Atkinson (2006) contend that the use of reflexivity in ethnographic research is self-indulgent and narcissistic. These positivist researchers build their argument on the assumption that reflexive autoethnography is more about the ethnographer, not social and cultural phenomena. However, these outcomes are unintended in ethnographic research because the use of the self as the subject and object of research inform the social and cultural reality beyond the ethnographer' self (Rosaldo 1993; Cohen 1992; Maréchal 2010). Other ethnographers such as Denzin and Bochner (2006) align themselves with Rosaldo and Cohen's conclusion, and argue for subjective approaches to autoethnography. They note that one of the most distinctive characteristics of autoethnographic research is that it promotes personal narrative, analysis and interpretation of the social and cultural surrounding. In other words, autoethnography not only focuses on the self, but involves others and seeks to understand the sociocultural context.

Within the context of this self-study research, I intended to use evocative autoethnography as a reflexive methodology to evoke self-reflection on self and the formation of my identity as a person and a teacher in relation to my pupils and others in

society. As I mentioned in the introduction to this essay, poetry as a creative method of inquiry will be used in conjunction with narrative reflections. This is because poetry is a means of self-discovery. As Butler-Kisber (2005) and Cahnmann (2003) contend, using poetry in research is a creative method in that it creates space for meaning-making through interaction between the narrator and the reader, and deepens their understanding of a certain phenomenon. The poems will be followed by an evocative self-reflective analysis and interpretation. The use of this autoethnographic method will help me reflect on the experiences that have shaped my character within the broader socio-cultural context. According to Chang (2012) and Ellis (2005), this method also connects the personal to the cultural. This will be done by reflecting on my personal to explore cultural practice. So, the focus of this autoethnography will not be an abstract self-narrative.

My first experience of drama and theatre

In 2000, I completed a BA degree in English Language and Literature from Hebron University, Palestine. I was appointed as a Teacher of English in my district where I taught primary and secondary school pupils for more than seven years. But I would say that I used the traditional approach of teaching due to the lack of professional training and support facilities. Most of the training workshops organised by the Directorate of Education in my district were theoretical and time consuming. My first exposure to drama in education was in 2007. That year, I was encouraged by a colleague, who worked as a part-time researcher at the Qattan Center for Educational Research and Development (QCERD), to participate in a drama in education workshop in Ramallah. QCERD is a non-governmental educational institute that provides teachers of different subjects with opportunities to engage in nontraditional, practical training workshops. The workshop was diversified and it attracted government, private and UNRWA primary and secondary school teachers, drama practitioners and freelancers from the West Bank and the Palestinian schools inside Israel. The experience was particularly significant, as it was the first in which I participated in a workshop with female and male participants in a nontraditional learning and teaching environment. It was a two-day intensive workshop focused on 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Boal 1979). Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, also called Image Theatre, is transformation of monologue into dialogue by

inviting audience to interact with characters on stage. It uses the human body as a tool of representing feelings, ideas, and relationships. The nature of the workshop required working in groups, moving freely in the hall and performing. The drama practitioners, freelancers and the teachers who are used to working in such environment seemed more confident than I and the other teachers from the government, UNRWA and primary schools. At the beginning of the first day of the workshop, I was very reluctant to actively participate in the mixed group activities. Although participants were welcoming, lively and kind, I felt like a lost person amidst the desert. I really felt lost.

Having been raised in a conservative town to the west of Hebron in the West Bank, I did not have the opportunity to mingle with people from other parts of my country, especially Bethlehem or Ramallah, two liberal cities with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. And then I suddenly found myself participating in a workshop with people from different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds, not only from Bethlehem and Ramallah but also from Palestinian cities inside Israel. I was like an abandoned child thrown away to face his fate. It was a challenge; take it or leave it.

I took the challenge. I would not be writing this paper in Chester, UK reflecting on that experience if I had not taken that challenge. My contribution to the first day of the workshop was limited and humble in comparison to other participants. During the second day of the workshop, we were divided into smaller groups and participants were asked to work together, create scenes and perform to the rest of the groups. We took on various roles, laughed, joked, and enjoyed each performance. We became good friends and I keep in touch with them. Every time a group performed, the rest of the groups played the role of the audience. We were asked to stop performing, step in and provide alternatives or solutions to the problems shown by the groups. In one of the scenes, I replaced one of the performers and performed differently. By the end of the workshop, I was able to express myself and had gained in terms of self-confidence. This positively impacted on my character as a teacher of English. I became more confident in using my voice and body in teaching a language that pupils hate when taught traditionally.

As stated previously, I rely on the poetic voice in conjunction with personal narrative to recall memories from the past. In this section, as well as in other sections, I am using a series of poems

based on my personal experience with learning and teaching drama. Stein (2004) posits that poetry is a powerful tool for presenting the author's lived experience metaphorically and communicating his or her emotions to the reader. It is also an effective tool for formulating pupils' identity.

The following poem represents my reflection on my first participation in a drama/theatre workshop. It represents my feelings while doing drama and why I felt so. It digs deep into my past. I am not ashamed to share segments of my life to better understand who I am and in the attempt to deepen the understanding of the reader about the broader socio-cultural context of Palestine in general, particularly Hebron.

A day that changed my way

Coming from the conservative south,
I felt like a child thrown on his mouth.
I grew up playing with boys,
I never had the chance to play with girls' toys.

Mixing with girls is in my culture a taboo,
We sometimes felt there was nothing to do.
I went to a boy's school and my teachers were all males,
I rarely talked to females rather than my mum, sisters and their girls.

Although universities in my city seem mixed,
In the classroom, boys still sit in the back while girls sit in the front.
In my culture, everything is justified in the name of religion,
Shaking hands with girls is now forbidden.

And guess what? I am now in a workshop where the majority are girls,
I am expected to not only shake hands but also dance and play various roles.
At the beginning of the workshop, I felt reluctant and was about to fall,
But drama has empowered me to the extent I danced like a fool.

I froze like a statute in various still images,
And sang like peasants harvesting in villages.
I played the role of an oppressed and an oppressor,
And made good friends as a soldier with a finger on the trigger.

Before that day, I was traditional and more like blind,
Drama freed my soul, my way of thinking and my mind.
All thanks go to my friend who recommended that day,
To drama, to Ramallah and to those participants who changed my way.

In this poem, I reflect on my first experience as an individual and school teacher coming from a conservative town to take part in a drama workshop with participants with different social, cultural and religious backgrounds. It is self-discovery, a translation of a lived experience into words. A combination of feelings that evoke memories from the past. The poem explains how people's identities are shaped and politicised by religion. Mixing is a major theme in the poem because it explains why a person like myself was reluctant and found it difficult to participate in the first day of the drama workshop, and had a cultural shock within one culture. It is a personal experience that informs the broader sociocultural political context. Although it is about me, it is not about me only. I became acutely aware of the inequality and exclusion of people like myself in

the Palestinian society. As a teacher of English, I also realised how pupils can easily be excluded and oppressed in the name of religion, tradition and politics. As a result of my participation in the drama workshop, my position shifted from being a traditional teacher to one that accept pupils and their mistakes, be more tolerant and more open-minded.

Reflection on this experience makes me wonder about the role of the individual in society. It is about our being in the world. It is about who we are and where we are. Will we remain silent even if given the opportunity to raise our voice and speak up?

The following poem is a reflection on reflection. It reflects on my feelings while I was in the taxi heading home after the workshop.

Feelings in a moving car

As I sat in the taxi ready to go home,
 Memories invaded my mind and started to roam,
 It's been two days since I've known them,
 But now I know details about where they come from.

As I sat in the back seat with eyes closed,
 Thoughts continued to dance in my head,
 I remembered the still images and the roles we performed,
 Put a wide smile on my face as music played.

As the taxi approached its destination,
 I started to feel the anger and frustration,
 Memories stopped and my mood suddenly shifted,
 I was going back to where I always existed.

Politics of religion, oppression and much more,
 That's what I expected as I opened the door,
 With the experience I gained from that workshop,
 I promised myself to change, go on and never stop.

Although it has been ten years since I had these feelings, I find them fresh as I reflect on them in this poem. Reflecting on these feelings now in my flat here in Chester, I remember the feelings of joy, happiness, frustration and hope. I am reliving the experience as I recall that memory. To recall the memory, I had to sit back on the couch and imagine as if I were on a taxi heading home after the drama workshop. With my eyes half closed I recalled and lived each word, each moment and each feeling. While the train of thought was touring my mind, my son was sitting next to me and playing games on my phone. He was playing FIFA 2016/17. He was living the game and rocking the couch every time he scored or the competitive team scored at him. The couch was more like a moving car and I was kind of interacting with the music of the FIFA game. Although we were in two different worlds, it seemed like my son unintentionally wanted to put me in the mood to best recall that memory. As he finished the game, my son tapped on my shoulder, that is when I realised my couch (my car I mean) has reached its destination. My son welcomed me with a smile as I opened my eyes. I smiled back at him and started writing my feelings in the poem.

Drama with school pupils

I made a promise to change. Drama and theatre have changed my life. They have challenged my way of thinking, my perceptions, and my epistemological and ontological positions. I was given an opportunity to change and I took it. But change is dynamic. It is a process. It requires readiness, willingness and sacrifice. My journey with change was and still is full of obstacles. But what about those waiting for an opportunity? I learned how effective drama and theatre can be for the marginalised, vulnerable and the oppressed (Boal 1979; Heathcote & Bolton 1995). I learned how important drama can be in developing self-esteem and fostering creativity. Drama is also an important method for language acquisition. It enabled me to make the curriculum meaningful and related to pupils' life experiences. Through drama, pupils could learn the language playfully and enjoyably. Now that I have the experience I gained from my first participation in the drama and theatre workshop, why not use it? Despite the difficulties, I decided to be an agent for change (Freire 1970; Giroux 2006). I worked as a teacher of English for several years and being a teacher of English in my country means to

literally teach the textbook quantitatively. It is a matter of quantity, not quality. School pupils always pay the price. I regret to say that I taught traditionally for a couple of years. Children neither liked English nor liked me. Not the me as a person, but the me as a teacher of English. I thought, and I still think, drama is a good means of learning for people of all ages. Taking myself as an example, when I participated in the Theatre of the Oppressed workshop, I played, danced, sang and learned enjoyably. I was the oppressed coming to be freed. The pupils I taught, were oppressed and they were also waiting to be freed.

I wanted the pupils to dance, sing, improvise and enjoy learning English (Cook 1917). I wanted them to take responsible roles and make choices, not only about their own learning but also about their life. I thought planning drama for school children is easy. I remember spending hours trying to plan a drama lesson. The Year 10 English Book had 24 units, 4 lessons in each unit. At the beginning, I did not know what to focus on and how to start. Another dilemma was academic achievement. Pupils are assessed based on the conventional assessment criteria. Drama is not about traditional academic achievement. It might indirectly improve pupils' achievement and develops self-esteem. It encourages pupils to learn actively and interactively about the world. Neelands (2009) argues that drama exceeds the subject area, he sees drama as "a living practice beyond schools" (p.180). It may improve achievement, it may not. To do drama for the first time, I had to meet with the head teacher and convince him of the effectiveness and importance of drama for pupils. I managed to convince him but it was a risk to take. No matter the means, he insisted on improving pupils' academic achievement by the end of the school term. I took the risk although the outcome was not clear to me.

As I noted earlier, planning drama was not easy but I finally managed to plan my first drama lesson. The main objective of my first drama lesson was to provide pupils with an opportunity to express their feelings, play, move their bodies and learn interactively. I wanted to create a space for creativity (Toivanen, Salomaa & Halkilahti 2016). Once I had planned the drama, and convinced the head teacher, who did not seem really convinced, it was time to do the actual drama with pupils.

The following poem represents my feelings as well as pupils' feelings and interaction during the drama lesson.

Swimmers in the river

Like swimmers in the river,
Like birds of beautiful feather.
We started our lesson,
This time we are on a mission.
It is about our life, about our being,
It is not about agreeing, it is about foreseeing.
We all walked across the classroom,
And with our eyes closed, we started to roam.

As pupils were crossing the river of life,
I stood on the bank and watched those little fish dive.
They swam in every direction,
And I did not seek perfection.

As they were in the circle exploring the world,
I sat on the edge of life with my memory swirled.
I cannot describe my feelings when I saw an "illegal" child,
Expressing himself and trying to say: Why this world is ignorant and blind.

The poem above is my first narrative reflection on using drama with school pupils. It showcases my lived experience while doing drama with Year 10 pupils. Through that drama, I wanted to teach pupils about the world. Instead, they taught me what the world is all about. I was surprised by their inner abilities. The way they used their voice and their bodies exceeded my expectations. Those pupils had the abilities but they were unexplored. I think, to some extent, I had explored some of those abilities. Did I solve their and my problems? Simply, I did not. How can a forty-minute drama lesson solve world's problems! The aim was to give an opportunity to express our feelings, emotions and explore our own worlds. If I had taught that lesson traditionally, I would have restricted their freedom to learn freely and enjoyably.

The mess that I created through the drama lesson was an opportunity to learn about myself and the pupils. It helped me touch on sensitive issues in the society. It helped me protect myself and my students. That 'illegal child', as some teachers in my school called him, was very active and showed great talent while performing. He wanted to have his voice heard. I heard his voice. Like those schoolmates, I would have blamed him for a fault that is not his if I had not used drama that day. Through drama, I as Gould Lundy (2008) says "helped my students become aware of the many silent voices in the world" (p.54). Drama does not solve the world's problems; it can help the teacher and the pupils uncover unfairness and seek justice. For me, drama is more than a technique; it is the lens through which I see the world.

Drama with pre-service teachers

As a teacher educator, a former school teacher and drama practitioner, I attempted to use drama and poetry as creative learning/teaching approaches to better understand my own teaching practice, and give pre-service teachers the opportunity and space to engage in dialogue and explore their own worlds. Also, to prepare them for the different worlds of the classroom. I struggled at the beginning of my teaching profession, due to the way when I was taught as a pre-service teacher. I could not meet the different needs of all children. Therefore, I did not want the students I taught to go through the same experience. I wanted them to learn through play and drama (Courtney, 1989). Be active participants, not passive recipients (Freire 1970; Giroux 2006).

I believe in the importance of a module that teaches learners to be reflective, creative and

critical (Smith 1977; Moss & McMillen 1980). When I started teaching the Philosophy of Education module to pre-service teachers, I thought of different ways and approaches to make learning exciting, enjoyable and meaningful. To start with, I combined poetry with drama. Poetry, because I write poems. I do not consider myself a poet though. I also have good experience in using drama in education. I think, through creative learning methods, pre-service teachers feel they are developing professionally.

I wrote this poem a few years ago. I did not use it for drama purposes before. I thought the theme is appropriate and good for doing drama with university level students, so I decided to try it out. The theme of the poem is to challenge 'reality' and construct one's identity.

Break through the wall

Break through the wall,
Break through it all.
Burst in the face of tradition,
Smash the doors of oppression.

Believe in yourself, each person is talented,
Do not take things for granted.
Always search for reality,
And construct your identity.

Build bridges of communication,
Not walls of hate and humiliation.
Mental walls cannot stand tall,
They are sometimes built to fall.

I have chosen to reflect on this specific experience because it was my first experiment in using poetry and drama with university level students. Although it was stressful for the learners and I, it was a good learning experience. I started by reading the poem out loud. At the beginning, I was a bit nervous but in the end, I managed to introduce the poem and read it confidently. When I planned the session, I wanted the pre-service teachers to think critically and respond creatively. Through transforming the poem into a performance, pre-service teachers could imagine themselves and others (O'Neill 1995; Boudreault 2010). Neelands (2004) asserts that imagining is the essence of drama. In Neelands' words, "drama provides opportunities to engage in self-other imagining" (Neelands 2002: 6). By imagining, pre-service teachers were given the opportunity to explore their creativity. I cannot describe my excitement when I saw them improvising, questioning and suggesting alternatives. They cooperated, worked in groups and performed creatively. Observing pre-service teachers doing all this was like reading a poem. I silently read the words *Break through the Wall* poem while going around the groups. Humming the words of the poem, I seemed more like the music the construction builders listen to as they collaboratively work to build a beautiful house. The use of poetry and drama as creative learning teaching approaches in higher education institution played an integral role in the development of personal and professional identity construction.

Discussion

As previously mentioned, I have used autoethnography and poetry in conjunction with narrative reflection to evoke my memories and represent my lived experience and my journey with learning and teaching drama. Zooming in and out on my lived experience, several themes emerged, which played an integral role in the development of my character and the formation of my identity. Through autoethnography, I began to understand the process of my character development, the formation of my identity and the implications of the socio-cultural political context on this process. This is crucial to me as a teacher and educator because it helped me understand the sociocultural backgrounds of my pupils and identify their needs. Prior to my participation in the Theatre of the Oppressed workshop, I knew I suffered. I lived the suffering. I was a victim of circumstances. My suffering is a beautiful suffering for the Theatre of the Oppressed. It is mainly about oppression, the

dominance of power and the struggle for liberation; it is about change. And my participation in that workshop is a life-changing experience. When I think about it now, I was the right person going to the right event. In other words, I did not choose the workshop, it chose me. It made me understand myself, question my practices, my role in the society; both as an individual and a teacher, my being in the world, and more importantly, uncover discontinuities in my culture, in the world, and position myself accordingly. I believe change begins on a personal level and it is the responsibility of the individual to help others change. But those who seek change should also have the willingness to change. And when they are ready for change, will they be given the opportunity to allow that change happen? Will they ever be heard?

Having used narrative reflection and poetry as a method of inquiry in this autoethnography, I realise the impact of such creative methods of inquiry on one's personal and professional development. As I mentioned earlier, I am not a poet but reflecting on my experience in poems was a creative way to recall memories. Although it was not comfortable to recall memories, through poetry, the experience was creative and enjoyable. Passing by the river on my bike everyday, memories of stanzas came to my mind. They danced and fought in my head. I enjoyed the dance and the beautiful fight. But I could not wait to get home and jot them down so that I rest for a while as they continued to dance and fight in the poems of my autoethnography. I do not think the impact would have been the same if I had used a conventional method of inquiry (Ackroyd & O'Toole 2010).

The use of poetic inquiry and drama also helped create an authentic learning environment; an environment where learning is meaningful and related to the life of the learner. After I attended my first drama and theatre workshop I could feel the difference when learning through a creative method. I could compare between learning creatively and learning the traditional way. When I used drama with school children and pre-service teachers I could also see the difference and the impact this method had on them, as well as on myself. Each constructed his or her own identity, his own world but collaboratively through connecting our bodies together, knowing that the self cannot stand alone. It needs the other to make this connection happen (Pelias 2011; Spry 2011).

Reflecting on my lived experience using poetic inquiry and narrative reflection also allowed for

another layer of meaning and ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the experience. Each poem in this autoethnography is followed by a reflection; reflection on reflection, as I called it earlier. Before embarking on this autoethnography I read autoethnographies that used poetry as a method of inquiry. The poems were powerful but they stood alone without reflection. I could not follow their story since it was a series of long poems written in a list-like form. It distracted me and could not grasp the meaning. Therefore, I believed that reflecting on the poems might add to the experience and help the reader engage in my story, make sense of my lived experience and echo his or her voice evocatively and emotionally (Bagley 2008; Furman 2007; Denzin 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have vividly reflected on my lived experiences with learning and teaching drama. I have argued that drama plays an integral role in the formation of my identity and the development of my character.

The role that drama and theatre play on character development and identity formation has been highlighted in this autoethnographic study. I have argued that drama and theatre open new horizons and provide opportunities to individuals to question their role and position in life and the world around them. My experiences with learning and teaching drama played a significant role in the formation of my identity and they help me to fluidly and liquidly travel around the world and work with people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

I have also discussed autoethnography as a valuable reflexive research methodology for exploring the lived experiences of the researcher. It helped me and it might help other researchers who want to gain insight into their lived experiences and understand the formation of their identity. I have also shown how autoethnography can be blended with other research approaches such as narrative and poetic inquiry. The significance of using a combined approach in autoethnography is that it helps the researcher reflect on his or her lived experience creatively and engages the reader emotionally and evocatively.

In regard to theory application in autoethnography, Maydell (2010) posits that autoethnographers face the dilemma of applying a strong relevant theoretical framework that best serves the objective of their research. I faced this in this autoethnography. I struggled with theory, wanting to make my lived experience salient, and at the same time, not lose the essence of using

poetic inquiry as an art-based method of inquiry. I hope the theories I have used in this autoethnography, to some extent, serve the objective of my research topic.

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