

The Calm Before the Storm: An Autoethnographic Self-Study of a Physical Education Teacher Educator

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'Self-study empowers us to scrutinize our practice'

(Garbett 2013).

Introduction

In this chapter I examine a piece of autoethnographic writing in the quest to understand myself as a teacher educator, the importance of such roles in shaping future teachers, and how such methodological approaches have the potential to contribute to understanding in career-long professional learning. In this way I follow the suggestions of Pelias (2004), who encourages researchers to '...write from the heart, to put on display a researcher who... brings himself [sic] forward a belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study' (p. 1).

Context of the Study

I have worked in the field of physical education for the past 20 years. During this time I have taught physical education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. These positions have been as a specialist teacher of physical education and have each contributed to a broad set of knowledge and abilities in respect to teaching, as well as a deep commitment to the value of physical activity to the learning and wellbeing of people throughout their lives. My doctoral studies focussed on how

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teachers' knowledge about physical activity and fitness influences children's physical activity during physical education. In 2003 I was appointed to my current position as a lecturer in physical education at Monash University and have spent the past 10 years working in teacher education.

During my early time with the university I did not refer to myself as a teacher educator, preferring to be known as an 'academic' or 'lecturer'. For me, the term teacher educator was foreign because I had undertaken postgraduate study in a School of Medical Sciences. It was only after several years of working within a Faculty of Education that I came to understand that teacher education was different to teaching. I perhaps did not engage with the term, for I was still stuck in a logic where my focus was on physical activity participation, not the process of educating students to become teachers. Granted, this may have in part been due to my teaching allocations, and engagement in research that was not focused in this space.¹

It was around the same time that I began searching for research and methodological approaches to enable me to further examine who I was and whether what I was doing during teaching was beneficial to my practice(s) but, more importantly, to me as a person. In this way I was initially drawn to researchers such as Sparkes (2004), and Denison and Markula (2003) who proposed and championed alternative (re)presentations of the 'moving body' – due in part to their work in the same academic space as I, that being sport, physical activity, and physical education. That being said, I was also encouraged to read work in the teacher education space by my Monash colleagues Amanda Berry, John Loughran, and Judy Williams amongst others – all of whom are active members in the self-study of teacher education practice (SSTEP) community. Conceptually, I attempted to put these passions together in a conceptual paper that I wrote in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education* (Brown 2011), for I saw that self-study and the use of alternative methods (such as autoethnography), in physical education and teacher education could enhance the work of teachers in schools. In many ways this chapter is an extension of this work.

¹My early publications were focused on outputs from my PhD and a sport-related focus. For example:

Brown, T. D. (2004). *The Development, Validation and Evaluation of the Physical Activity and Fitness Teacher Questionnaire (PAFTQ)*. (Doctoral Dissertation), RMIT University, Melbourne.

Brown, T. D., & Holland, B. V. (2005). Student physical activity and lesson context during physical education. *ACHPER Healthy Lifestyles Journal*, 52(3–4), 17–23.

Brown, T. D. (2004). Test-retest reliability of the self-assessed physical activity checklist. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 99(3), 1099–1102.

O'Connor, J. P., & Brown, T. D. (2007). Real cyclists don't race: informal affiliations of the weekend warrior. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 42(1), 83–97.

Brown, T. D., O'Connor, J., & Barkatsas, A. (2009). Instrumentation and motivations for organised cycling: The development of the cyclist motivation instrument (CMI). *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, 8(2), 211–218.

O'Connor, J., & Brown, T. D. (2010). Riding with the sharks: Serious leisure cyclists' perceptions of sharing the road with motorists. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 13(1), 53–58.

Autoethnography and Narratives of Self

The narratives of self are an evocative form of writing that produces highly personalised and revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences. (Richardson 1994 cited in Sparkes 2004, p. 73)

As a form of autobiographical writing, multiple layers of one's consciousness link personal-to-cultural, cultural-to-social, and personal-to-environmental (Ellis and Bochner 2000). As a research method, autoethnographic writing sits very comfortably and consistently with self-study (Hamilton et al. 2008). As a form of research and (re) presentation, autoethnography is well supported within the broader sport studies research literature (Denison and Markula 2003; Markula and Silk 2011; Sparkes 2004) but has yet not found a presence within Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE). Proponents such as Armour et al. (2001), and more recently Brown and Payne (2009), have called for more researchers to use autoethnography as a mechanism to further develop teachers' understanding of their lived experiences, and in particular, to develop further embodied understanding where 'sensuous' qualities such as sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste or 'scapes' (Sparkes 2009) are developed and understood.

According to Patton (2002) autoethnography has as its basis '...your own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part' (p. 86). As an approach there exists great variability in the position of the researcher *within* the text. Of importance to the research approach is the notion of self-awareness and how one's experiences and interpretations (or subjectivity) are framed through personal, social, cultural, and environmental lenses. In some ways such representations or lived experiences are examples of the observer's (in this case insider-observer), perception of reality. At the heart of this approach are many qualities that give depth to it as a characterisation, namely: it includes researchers' vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, and spirits; it examines how the human experience is endowed with meaning, and; it is concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences. As such, it connects social sciences with the living of life.

When describing these highly personalised and revealing texts, authors use such characteristics to represent lived experiences. Ellis (1999) described these features as characteristics of heartfelt autoethnographical writing. In line with Ellis and in response to calls for a methodology of heart (Pelias 2004), I seek to have my vulnerable self opened to public scrutiny as I write about my lived experiences in the story: 'The calm before the storm'.

Method

To get at the heart of my teaching I have utilised a methodology known as narrative of self or autoethnography. I was drawn to this after reading a paper by Armour et al. (2001) who recognise its potential for physical educators to engage with meaningful, ongoing professional learning. As I developed more articulate understandings of autoethnography as a methodology and philosophy, I was also grappling with how

such an approach could ‘fit’ within a broader dialogue known as self-study. To this end, I have been heavily influenced by Taylor and Coia’s (2009) use of autoethnographic self-studies.

For the current study I have chosen to focus on a vignette I had written as part of an ongoing autoethnographic project of my teaching during two academic years (2011–2012). As part of this project I generated a series of narratives of my teaching that I posted on a public blog to share with my students. In my mind, these vignettes served two purposes: (a) they were written to prompt undergraduate PETE students (undergraduate and honours students) to consider the complexity of the teaching environment, and; (b) to encourage deeper reflection for meaning about one’s individual practice (Brown 2011; Loughran 2006).

In seeking to make deeper sense of these stories I was conscious that in self-study data analysis is dynamic, in that the ‘dualisms of theory and practice, subject and object, research and teaching are collapsed’ (Anderson et al. 2007, p. 25). To facilitate and provoke a deeper analysis, I worked closely with another teacher educator and researcher from an overseas institution to act as a critical friend. The critical friend utilised a framework underpinned by the following points to support academic exchanges via electronic mail:

1. To consider if there is sufficient detail in the story. What has been missed or glossed over that may be important to making sense of the reflection? What words, metaphors or clichés need clarifying or explaining?
2. To provide commentary on what seems to be significant about the practice. This feedback should provide more than cursory praise; it should provide a lens that helps to elevate the work, and;
3. To ask questions that may nudge (challenge, provoke, irritate) you to see issues, situations, experiences, and actions from different perspectives.

In the following discussion I present the vignette and discuss how I came to use this as a mechanism to understand my own identity as a teacher educator more fully.

Vignette: The Calm Before the Storm

I’m in a lecture room of a campus that I am unfamiliar with preparing for the first seminar of the semester. I am a little early, an hour to be exact as I wanted to get a feel for the room that I would be teaching in for the rest of the semester. It is warm inside the room and I think that I am overdressed wearing jeans, T-shirt, shirt and jacket. I take my jacket off and roll up the sleeves of my shirt.

I take everything out of my satchel and pile it on the desk. My folder with seminar notes, the textbook, the unit guides and the first week’s readings. I put them in order from right to left based on how I expect the class to run. I make sure that they are all evenly spaced and think to myself that this is a bit odd as I am not normally that neat. With everything out I can move onto my next task, the technology.

I log myself into the computer as I have done a thousand times over, but the computer does not seem to like it. I hit ‘enter’ on the keyboard a little harder the

second time, after I have made sure that my username and password have been entered correctly. The computer pauses as I feel a flush of frustration rush over my body. *Why is this taking so long* I think to myself. I pace back to the desk and pull my pencil case and whiteboard markers from my satchel. I hear the familiar sound of the desktop finally recognising my username and password as the operating software chimes and the desktop opens. *Thank goodness that the computer is working, I have done all this work over the past month to make sure that this unit is accessible to students 24/7 with podcasts, embedded videos, Twitter feeds, cheat sheets and how to guides. If I can't get the computer to work now then I will really look like silly in front of my class.*

Shortly I will be joined by 35 final year students about to complete their final semester of study prior to becoming physical education teachers. Most of the students I have taught before as part of their 4-year undergraduate program, the others I will meet for the first time. These students are part of a 1-year program known in Australia as a Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary). When I think about these 'Grad Dip' students I feel that I have not prepared well enough for this class. *What prior knowledge do these students possess? Who are they? Have I provided them with enough opportunity to develop into effective teachers? Will they have enough tools to use in the classroom?* I continue to question my ability. I move back to the desk at the front of the class and pull my PowerPoint notes out from the plastic pocket that is sitting in the top right corner of the desk. I read through my notes and pay particular attention to my handwritten notes in pencil linked to each slide. I notice that in one example it is perhaps too narrow so I highlight this by underlining the words on the slide and add another comment to the handwritten section that appeases my concern about 'real-world' examples for the 'Grad Dip' students.

I move back towards the computer and log into the online teaching system that is operated by the university. I click on the unit and scroll through all the icons that I have developed. I look up at the screen, as the overhead projector has now kicked in, and feel pleased of that there are tangible outcomes for the world to see. *The site looks good. Yes you have done a lot of work, let's hope that all that time you spent learning how to program html code is useful and that the student's appreciate the time that you have dedicated to the creation of this online portal.* I click through the icons and make sure that I have all the required webpages ready to use.

I start pacing around the room again thinking and reflecting that I have everything ready and in order to give this seminar. I look down at my watch and there is still 35 min before class begins. I go back over to the computer and remember that I have a video clip that I want to show to the students which highlights and important point about creativity and the role of the teacher in developing a nurturing this creativity. I have embedded the URL somewhere in the online portal page and search for couple of minutes trying to find this. *I am sure I put this somewhere, where is it?* I click through a couple of icons and suddenly remember that it is under the folder that I have 'hidden' from view titled seminar. I click on the link and it connects to the internet before going to this well-known video-sharing portal. I press play on the screen and can see it moving but cannot hear the sound. *I am pretty techno savvy and yet I can't hear the sound?* I struggle to get the sound working. I bend down and start playing with dials and knobs that I think are connected to the computer. Nothing. I start

to panic. I look at my watch and see there are now 30 min before class. *What do I do?* I search to room for the phone and find the number for IT support. I call it and mention what the problem is.

I go back to the desk and make sure that everything is OK with how I would imagine the class to run. In what seems like an eternity I wait for the IT support to come into the room. Eventually they arrive and put both my mind and body at rest. I seem to stand over this individual as they explain to me what I have done wrong. They go through the same procedure that I previously did some 10 min ago. He hits a couple of buttons and clicks play on the screen. As if we were both present at a U2 concert, a sudden thunderous noise emanates from the speakers connected to the computer. The IT person and I both try and grab the mouse to change the volume on the video. *Ahh everything seems to be in order.* We continue a conversation about technology and the virtues of using it in class. I thank him deeply. *I really thought I could do this myself. If I can't do this, what will happen if I demonstrate the technology in class and the students can't seem to use it?*

Being a Teacher Educator: A Story Expanded

Given a purpose of writing and sharing this narrative with my teacher education students was to exemplify and model teaching behaviour when meeting a class for the first time. My hope was that the story presented the complexity and multitude of actions required of any teacher, be that student teacher, beginning teacher or teacher educator when preparing before a class. In many ways it is an explicit acknowledgement of what I call a solitary space of the unknown that teachers encounter before their classes begin, where a melange of thoughts, fears, and angsts are felt both rationally and irrationally. Such communication to students and therefore analysis shares similarities to the seminal work of Berry (2007) who wrote about journaling and stories:

This journal contained a record of my purposes for each session, how I saw these purposes unfold ... An important purpose of the Open Journal was to provide prospective teachers with access to my thinking about the classes, including my aims, how I felt about whether or not these aims had been met, as well as other questions, concerns and observations arising from my experiences of the session (p. 24).

The 'solitary space' of being in the classroom by myself, collecting and developing thoughts, preparing the technology in many ways, is an example of the mundane in that it highlights the pedagogical work that is always ongoing in a teacher's life. In many ways it is about acknowledging that teaching requires some technical prowess, or as Shulman (1987) stated, possessing general pedagogical knowledge. What I feel the story reveals to readers are aspects of pedagogy that often go unseen by students of teaching; the preparation, the anxiety, the panic, and the fear. It is about how one negotiates the tasks of a teacher on a daily basis. It is also an explicit demonstration that teachers are always considering their students and the act of teaching, that is teachers are always 'on' – a teacher's life is never ending. Teachers are always considering their students, the content they are going to

teach, and the pedagogies they employ. This happens in the shower, driving home from work, at the gym, or immediately before class begins – such ideas, thoughts, and reflections happen wherever and whenever (Loughran 2010).

Another reading closely connected with the classroom management and preparation described is in some ways a response about risk or perhaps attempting to remain psychologically safe – controlling the unknown. What happens if the video does not work? What do the students think about icons, content management systems, or technology? Have I got a back-up plan for teaching and learning should the tools fail? As is exemplified in the narrative, the processes that I employ as a teacher, e.g. getting to class far too early, setting up the projector and computer system and organizing my notes, highlight my personal approach to teaching that has been developed to decrease or to manage risk and subsequently to decrease my own personal psychological fears about the potential (read negative) outcomes of the class. The preparation was about creating and demonstrating a personal safety net, highlighting that no matter how experienced a teacher you are it is OK to feel anxious, nervous, and worried prior to teaching and acknowledging that classroom preparation of materials, tools, and activities is at the cornerstone of good teaching practice. Additionally and perhaps subconsciously I also possessed concerns about making the tacit explicit, whilst simultaneously being concerned about how I was likely to deliver such content, a point picked up by Williams et al. (2012) in drawing on Loughran's (2006) statement that teacher educators are always teaching about teaching on at least two levels: what they are teaching teacher candidates (content) and how they are teaching teacher candidates (pedagogy).

The process of writing narratives and (re)reading them, provides an excellent opportunity for teachers and teacher educators to consider their practice reflexively, for it 'provide(s) a way of theorising the process of teacher education as it is lived' (Ovens 2007, p. 14). Given that physical education teachers by their very nature are practical people, developing strategies that allow them to explore 'real-world' practical situations through storying, journaling, or similar approaches has the potential to be a powerful professional learning process (Brown 2011). Furthermore for teacher educators, such as myself, I hope that like Berry (2007) I continually re-frame my understanding of teaching teachers. For me this is best achieved through these short narratives that are private, personal, and mine, and which get at the 'heart' (Pelias 2004) of my teaching. Given my interest and presentation of a narrative of self, otherwise known as an autoethnography as part of this book chapter, it is pertinent to examine briefly how autoethnography 'fits' more broadly with the focus of this book, namely self-study. What follows is an attempt to position some of the themes within both approaches that are worthy of interest to readers in self-study and autoethnography.

Personal Reflections

Part of the allure of self-study is that it leads to meaningful pedagogical change, in that 'personal theories are challenged in ways that help the researcher [here the teacher educator] see beyond the personal alone' (Loughran 2007, p. 13). In my

continuous reading and re-reading of my narrative whilst being open to considering ‘outside’ readings, my critical friend provocatively gestured that in many ways such a story positioned me as transmission-style of teacher – in that I was driving preparation, content, questions, and flow of the lesson. In reflecting and cogitating on such a point of view, I can see how one would draw such conclusions. Nevertheless, such comments in my opinion were hurtful for I never considered this to be my underlying assumption as a teacher. For me such an overt focus on transmission-style teaching created a ‘tension’ (Berry 2007) between what I actually do versus what I perceive I do. I do admit that I possess an attitude and belief in teaching that privileges the need for (student) teachers to be prepared psychologically, physically, and emotionally for the teaching episode. In many respects this is especially true for students of teaching who have not engaged with the act of teaching in any real or meaningful way (e.g. actual teaching on professional experience). Such concern probably emanates from observing and working with student teachers across the past 10 years as a teacher-educator where preparation has been considered and enacted only superficially, and it is my overt consciousness wishing that if I could demonstrate such preparedness then my students might consider the importance of such practices as well. Clearly this autoethnographic self-study as an approach utilising a critical friend has stimulated some thinking on my behalf in respect to my teaching and my identity within it. With regard to teaching I continue to think, plan, and advocate for pedagogies and models that are post-traditional (e.g. teacher-directed) which consider teaching and learning ‘about, through, and in’ (Arnold 1979) physical education as more holistic in nature. Many of these examples emanate from pedagogical models such as sport education, cooperative learning, or guided-discovery learning that acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and therefore multiple ways of teaching.

Beyond that personal level of how my attitudes and beliefs of my teaching have been challenged, I sought also to understand how such approaches as self-study and autoethnography can contribute to my understanding about teacher education. Drawing on Casey (2012), I am a product of my education, my work/life circumstances, and the prior and contemporary histories of people and places of education. In other words, I am part of a cultural history of physical education and simultaneously teacher education. As a proponent of what some have labelled as a pedagogy of teacher education (Loughran 2006), the reason I have chosen to engage with self-study is that ‘beyond improvement...is a commitment to teaching, teachers and the profession’ (p. 26). Self-study’s overt focus on the act of teaching, in line with approaches that are consistent with espousing more subjective understandings of the individuals within the act of teaching (e.g. sensuous autoethnographic approaches), from my perspective strengthens how we come to understand the knowledge and pedagogies of teaching, whereby giving sensuous privilege and deeper understanding to the individual in the classroom known as the teacher.

Concluding Thoughts

The process of writing this chapter or analysing its content, has not been a straightforward or easy exercise for me. At many times I have thought about stopping and quitting and not sharing this with readers, for it presents a public ‘vulnerable self’ as a teacher and teacher educator. Reflecting on my decade long employment at university and episodic narrative as told here reveals an individual still finding ‘my feet’ as a teacher educator whilst simultaneously negotiating an identity in higher education (Williams and Power 2010; Williams et al. 2012). In many respects such a public presentation pains me on an unconscious level for I still do not know if I really fit in, or whether (I am or) my work is truly valued. Yet consciously I can understand why such public exhibition of self as part of self-study is a valuable personal and professional ‘tool’. I am so grateful for the support that I received from my critical friend in the belief that ‘with collaboration with significant others inside and/or outside the school setting... significant change in the cultural histories and predefined expectations we have about teaching’ (Casey 2012, p. 231) may change.

Stories, autoethnographies, or narratives of the self and self-study have the power to evoke meanings about our lives. They also have the ability to be considered as part of personal pedagogical change (Casey 2012). Whilst traditionally sports studies have focused on the player or performer and their interpretation of movement, more recently we have seen that the approaches advocated here develop a more positive following within the academic community and present opportunities for the physical education profession to expand our understanding of the profession, and in particular the act of teaching. The focus here has primarily been on autoethnography and self-study, but there also exist fantastic opportunities in the representation of data and experiences, through multiple ways such as co/autoethnography (Taylor and Coia 2009), poetic representations (Sparkes et al. 2003), ethnodramas (Brown 1998) or fictional representations (Denison 1999). I leave the final word to Brown et al. (2009, p. 16) who wrote:

It is important that researchers and practitioners continue to advocate and develop various pedagogies, curricula and approaches to their work, so that the multi-layered qualities of bodily movement and how individuals come to make meaning of their movement, becomes an ingrained component of their moving educational experiences.

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