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## 12. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A WIDE-ANGLE LENS ON LOOKING (INWARD AND OUTWARD)

*What Difference Can This Make to Our Teaching?*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the defining features of autoethnography that binds all autoethnographies, as Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis observed, “is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience” (2013, p. 7). In this chapter, I address the question of how autoethnography can contribute to teaching in higher education institutions, and situate this work in the context of South Africa. What are some of the considerations, challenges, and benefits of autoethnography? I write from my position of being a semi-insider (and semi-outsider): as an honorary professor in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, currently conducting research with South African teachers (both preservice and in-service), supervising doctoral students, and working alongside colleagues who are both teachers and researchers in various South African higher education institutions. This semi-insider status may give me a somewhat privileged position of looking “inward” through my teaching and research experiences in two countries, Canada and South Africa, and as such being made aware, from time to time, of occupying particular border spaces. But it is also the case that this may also give me a position for looking “outward” in relation to broader issues. It is these border spaces of being both inside and outside, that strike me as being ideal for engaging in autoethnography. My particular angle for this chapter draws on the work of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (2003). As they wrote:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth ethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic *wide-angle lens* [emphasis added], focusing on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look *inward* [emphasis added], exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 209)

It is their idea of both the wide-angle lens and looking inward that frames the use of the visual in autoethnography (for example, taking or working with photographs, creating cellphlms or videos, and working with other digital media forms), representing something of a border space for exploration.

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My first explicit and deliberate foray into the work of autoethnography was to embark on “Oil Rights/Rites,” a visual and memory-work project that I continue to work on, and which is linked to “growing up in oil” in the 1950s on my parents’ farm in rural Manitoba on the prairies of Canada. Petroleum, oil—the oil industry—is of course a fraught one in Canada, in sub-Saharan Africa, and globally, in relation to environment, the economy, oil rights, big business, and oil barons. Largely invisible in the oil discourses, however, are issues of employment, people’s lives, and identities. When I carried out the fieldwork and prepared the writing of “Oil Rights/Rites: Autoethnography As a Tool for Drilling” (Mitchell, 2013), a study that draws on photos, newspaper clippings, and other material artefacts from the family archive, I was largely unaware of the emerging work in an area now known as *oil studies* and *oil culture* (Barrett & Worden, 2014b). As these authors observed in the introduction to their book, *Oil Culture*:

Wishfully, we think that oil’s emergence as a subject of analysis signals a shift in its hold on our world. More sceptically, we also acknowledge that this new scholarly interest in oil is so vital because oil is everywhere, and it shows little sign of being eclipsed by another energy source in the near future. (p. xviii)

My autoethnographic piece on drilling highlights some of the tensions in researching inward in relation to a topic that is not only unpopular, but indeed, is laden with what at best could be described as politically incorrect. Yet, when I talk about the issues, or describe my essay to others, I discover vast and untapped stories that continue the from-the-personal-to-the-cultural line proposed by Ellis and Bochner (2003). This, for me, highlights the use of the wide-angle lens metaphor.

In my “Oil Rights/Rites” essay I do not connect the issues directly to teaching, but I do establish a place for examining positionality, something that I see as key to looking inward in relation to our own teaching. If we accept the idea that our teaching is meant to be generative and productive and located within the social constructions of knowledge—all tenets of contemporary teaching and learning—then we need to embrace models, approaches, practices, and projects that allow us to follow the border lines to connect the personal to the cultural, and the cultural back to the personal. In order to explore this, I devote the first section of the chapter to describing a cellphilm project I carried out with a group of other teacher educators. I describe it here in detail as a way to consider a set of six so-what? propositions for exploring the question of what difference this work makes. Drawing on this description in the first section, I go on in the second section, to look at six critical so-whats? of the chapter. In the final section, I offer some ideas on the implications of this work for teaching in higher education institutions in South Africa.

#### EDUCATORS TRANSFORMING

In this section, I start by describing a cellphilm project, *Educators Transforming*, that I carried out with a group of 10 other teacher educators in a Canadian context.

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We initially came together at a working group session of the Canadian Association of Teacher Education (CATE), finding ourselves in the same small group for 2 days. Our discussions and presentations within the group led us to propose a cellphilm initiative where we would each prepare a short (1–2 minutes) cellphilm (video made with a cell phone), using the same umbrella prompt, “Educators Transforming.” Our interest was in the ways in which, as teacher educators, we might think of the idea of *transforming* in relation to our role in teacher education, and our plan was to use the productions to organise a session of the annual CATE conference that would take place 6 months later. While we were not bound to look at the work through the lens of autoethnography, it would be accurate to say that the resulting productions (which were later edited into one longer video, *Educators Transforming*) drew on autoethnography. In my own piece I decided to work explicitly with autoethnography, and used Adrienne Rich’s poem “Transcendental Etude,” a text I also cite in the last chapter of *Reinventing Ourselves As Teachers: Beyond Nostalgia* (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). I had just purchased the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), and so it too, appears in the cellphilm. In the production, I read aloud a section of “Transcendental Etude” and as I get close to the end of my reading of the poem, I blow a going-to-seed dandelion into the air.



Figure 12.1. Spreading the seed

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Along with the production of these cellphilms (and the longer video), we also agreed to each write a short artist's statement. I include my own statement, "About Etude," below:

I have always loved Adrienne Rich's poem "Transcendental Etude" and recently I had occasion to quote from it in something I was writing in relation to collective biography. So it was sort of in my mind before I started this project. I did play around with a few other ideas, including a little interview with myself about something, but then I hit on the idea of reading aloud the poem and looking for some images that would go with it. In making the cellphilms, I worked with Laurel Hart a doctoral student in Fine Arts and Art Education at Concordia [University, Canada].

In some ways it was the reading aloud—that is, the audio—that was more important to me than the visual although I realised that my voice just trailed off in places, so it was just as well that I had some images. I liked the idea of going off into a room by myself and reading it aloud three or four times. It was a reminder to me of the role of performance in self-study. How did I sound to myself? What did it feel like reading aloud those lovely words of Rich's? It made me want to teach poetry again. The images in the cellphilms were based on what I had in my office. I had just purchased the brand new *Handbook of Autoethnography* at AERA [American Educational Research Association]. I had actually just taken off the plastic wrap the day before and was sorry that it wasn't still on. Somehow, there could have been an interesting scene of peeling off the plastic. Then I have this ancient book, Harper's Geography, from the late 1800s. It should have been history to go with the poem but I thought the book was so old that it was historical anyway. And there was an African school exercise book that one of my PhD students had just brought back from Cameroon. I liked that.

But what intrigued me most was going outside and filming this in a park-like area of the campus just outside the Education building. The area was covered in dandelions going to seed. I suppose it is a bit trite but somehow blowing those dandelion seeds into the breeze seemed fitting. It was actually breezier than I thought and I barely had to do any blowing. In making the cellphilms, we recorded my voice first so that we could concentrate on the images on their own. It was quite funny. Laurel had taken a course with me on visual methodologies the previous fall and we had done some cellfilming and participatory video. I was always obsessed with the idea of storyboarding in the course—but when it came time to doing the filming it was Laurel who said, "Why don't you do a storyboard?"

In the end, 'Etude' is a little rough but it was fun to do on a Friday afternoon in May. I always love being outside doing things like this. A couple of people stopped to see what we were doing. Maybe I am a bit of an exhibitionist; I like

to see spaces transformed and in this case, it meant transforming a footpath into an art space. It is funny too—the footpath runs alongside the pavement and there is really no gain to go on the footpath but everyone wants to walk on the footpath which, on that Friday, wound through the dandelions going to seed but at other times of the year winds through early spring flowers, all purple and sweet, and of course at other times fall leaves or snow. (Artist’s statement, May 21, 2013)

When I look back at the production of “Etude,” I know the technicalities of sound (dealing with wind and the great outdoors) weren’t perfect, and the coordination of timing could have been better. But I think I just wanted to use the dandelion (something at hand because it was May and dandelion season in Montreal) to demonstrate the idea of spreading the seed of our work as teacher educators and in so doing contribute to social change. Until I came to write this chapter, I had forgotten about writing the artist’s statement and, indeed, only remembered writing it that day of the filming when it appeared on the search function of my laptop two years later. However, as I read it over I think it captured then (and still represents) things that I regard as important in my teaching and which point towards a connecting of the personal to the cultural. While there may be more, there are three points that stand out and connect to Ellis and Bochner’s (2003) notion of the wide-angle lens.

The first is the idea of “what goes around comes around,” and that what you give out comes back many times over and in unexpected ways (even the seeds you blow out may come back). These may of course simply be aphorisms, but they suggest ways that we make sense of our work through the broader cultural context and, perhaps simultaneously, the ways in which the sayings that surround us in a particular cultural context sometimes construct our interpretation of personal experiences. Placing them here as I do with spreading the seed and what goes around comes around, is an example of working across the personal and the cultural. It is also an area that could be developed further (as in beyond the 60-second cellphilm and artist’s statement), especially if my transforming-educator colleagues joined me in exploring the issue further.

The second, coming out of the first, is the idea of serendipity and working with what is at hand. Many years ago, I wrote an article about making-do in our teaching, borrowing from my mother’s common sense insistence that we make-do (Mitchell, 1988). I cannot count the number of times that I have stood in my office, just minutes before a class that is already prepared, and I suddenly and at the very last moment grab something off a bookshelf or from a file cabinet that is suddenly “just right.” Somehow, the formulations of at hand and making-do come together in “Etude.” The things at hand for my cellphilm included the copy of the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, the notebook, and of course the dandelions. Now I wonder what I would have produced in a different season, but know that there would have been something else at hand. Perhaps, as Sandra Weber and I took up in our book on images of teachers and teaching in popular culture, *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look*

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*Like a Teacher* (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), this notion of working with what is at hand, in itself, is part of cultural critique—both in relation to who is a teacher, and also how we are constructed and construct ourselves as people who are constantly on the lookout for what can work.

The third point relates to teaching as cultural production (for example, performance and rehearsal) even if it may not (and perhaps should not) appear that polished in the final version. Reading “Transcendental Etude” over and over before going outside to film was necessary both in relation to “getting it right” and in terms of internalising its meaning. Some months later, as I sit in a workshop at McGill University on digital memory work, and as others are talking about their work, I hear myself reciting in my head the poem, and am poised to jump in with Adrienne Rich’s opening lines. I feel as though I own the poem and it owns me, and for that moment am in perfect accord with the formulation by literary theorist, Louise Rosenblatt (1978), of the notion of *The Reader, the Text and the Poem*.

Studying the production of “Etude” allows me to identify some features of my own teaching, as I have just highlighted, but it also offers up the idea of a cultural map, of sorts, of teaching and learning, and of producing and being produced. The question, “How is it cultural?” is not easily answered. I cannot definitively separate out what I have written about in “Etude” (as a teacher educator) from the many useful frameworks for engaging in self-study in relation to one’s own teaching. Is it narrative, or memory work, or self-study or autoethnography? At best I can say that perhaps the answer lies in relation to intention, and for what it can reveal in the context of the wide-angle lens. For me, the Educators Transforming project, drawing explicitly on the cultural (historical, social, linguistic) and cultural production (producing cellphilms, videos, working with family photographs) has the intention to deepen an understanding of ourselves and our work (cultural work) in a broader cultural context of making (in this case, digital making). For this reason, the wide-angle lens (looking inward and outward) is key.

#### SIX PROPOSITIONS

But what can be gained by trying to connect the personal to the cultural and cultural critique? And why is important that we draw on this self-directed work that draws on memory, history, literature, and so on? Organised around a series of propositions, and drawing specifically on “Etude” and several related autoethnographic projects, this section considers the so-what? of auto-ethnography in relation to contributing to six main areas which, I would argue, have a great deal to do with teaching: (1) creativity and doing something different, (2) collaboration, (3) positionality, (4) ethics, (5) addressing social justice, and (6) advocacy. These are all points of culture and cultural critique that are taken up in the growing number of books, articles, and conference sessions on autoethnography. As the area grows it is possible to see emerging categories within autoethnographic practice: autoethnographic performance (Schneider, 2005), critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013),

collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012) and, as I am describing in several examples in this chapter, visual autoethnography (Chaplin, 2011). While there may be differences, and there are certainly commonalities, perhaps the commonality that is key, is the question of so-what?

*Proposition 1: Doing Something Different*

*“Auto-ethnography can be a way of doing something different with theory and its relation to experience” (Kathleen Stewart, 2013, p. 659).* Perhaps “doing something different with theory and its relation to experience” should not be the first thing that comes to mind when we think about becoming more conscious in our teaching. Innovation for the sake of innovation may not be the best way to improve teaching and learning, or at least not the only criterion. As Stewart went on to observe, “The prospect is unsettling for some, a relief for others” (p. 659). However, working creatively with what is at hand is critical to social change. More than a decade ago, researchers and practitioners were writing about *AIDS fatigue* and the idea that young people were *sick of AIDS* (Mitchell & Smith, 2003), and began to call for innovative and creative ways for engaging young people. While teaching in South African universities is not only about addressing HIV and AIDS, there is a challenge to keep our work and ourselves fresh and alert to new possibilities. When my colleagues in Educators Transforming produced their cellphilm, it was with the enthusiasm for trying something new. In my “Alone in the Classroom” (Mitchell, 2012) talk at the CATE conference, I had referred to a cellphilm project with teachers in rural South Africa (Mitchell & de Lange, 2013). The immediate response of many of the participants at the conference was, “Why can’t we do this too?” and we had numerous e-mails back and forth where people worked out how they could make a cellphilm. One colleague sent an e-mail about how much she had learned about her cell phone, and several others commented on how much they had enjoyed working with (out of necessity) one of their children in order to complete the project.

This same idea of doing something different was central to the work of a group of 25 teacher educators from almost all teacher education schools and faculties in South Africa, all members of the Higher Education and Training HIV/AIDS Programme’s (HEAIDS) community of practice (CoP) on teaching and HIV and AIDS, when they embarked on a photovoice project in which they each took photos of change in their respective institutions. They worked with the prompt: “What does change look like? What has changed for you (or your faculty or school) in terms of integrating HIV and AIDS into your academic curriculum?” At a community of practice workshop, people created captions and looked closely at how the images offered a different lens for assessing where we are in relation to addressing HIV and AIDS. The idea that their images would become part of a travelling exhibition, *Seeing, Believing and Acting for Change: Integrating HIV and AIDS in Higher Education Curricula* (de Lange et al., 2014), as well as one that would be virtual, meant that they could

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both study themselves and their institution as well as be part of something creative and artistic—and that would tell a new story of HIV and AIDS in South Africa.

*Proposition 2: Collaboration*

*Autoethnography by its very nature invites us to seek and test out new collaborations through interdisciplinary projects as well as new writing collaborations with non-scholar collaborators in our lives.* As noted above, the Educators Transforming group was a small working group participating in a working session of the Canadian Association of Teacher Education. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, I had delivered a talk at the conference that I called “Alone in the Classroom” (Mitchell, 2012), inspired by the novel of the same name by Canadian author, Elizabeth Hay (2011). “Alone in the classroom” is, of course, a well-known phrase in teaching circles and teacher education that reflects several discourses, ranging from “be careful—never be caught alone in the classroom,” along the same lines as “never touch a child,” to the one that speaks to the anxiety any of us might feel alone in the classroom with a group of students. This could just as easily characterise the first-day anxiety of teachers in schools or lecturers in university settings and yet, often, there is little in our preparation or in our work with new teachers that seeks to counter this by promoting collaborative work. Interestingly, a report released by the Canadian Education Association (CEA) and Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF; 2012), *Teaching the Way We Aspire To Teach: Now and in the Future*, is illuminating in relation to collaboration. The study sought to study the aspirations of Canadian teachers. The method involved focus groups across the country, along with an online survey that drew on the responses of more than 4,000 teachers. While there are many interesting findings, an area that I found particularly pertinent was a reference to collaboration. As the study found:

The desire to build collaborative relationships with colleagues was one of the strongest dimensions. Teachers envisioned policies and processes that would enable the development of more opportunities for working together in ways that current school structures do not always allow or promote. Instead of being bound by traditional disciplines and grade levels, many expressed the desire to collaborate on cross-grade, interdisciplinary units, tasks, and projects that connected both teachers and students in new and diverse ways. Participants were enthusiastic in their support of challenging approaches to schooling that have supported traditional images of teachers working in isolation. Shared planning times, flexible scheduling, and alternative approaches to designing curriculum were just some of the suggestions offered but, at the heart of the discussion, was the desire to be able to learn, plan, and work more closely with colleagues. (CEA & CTF, 2012, p. 18)

The effectiveness of Educators Transforming as an initiative rested on the one and the many. The success of it comes out of the fact that 11 of us produced cellphlms,



and that we were, in a sense, audiences for each other. While many authors in many aspects of narrative, self-study, and autobiography refer to collaborative engagement (see for example Pithouse, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2009), the place of collaboration in autoethnographic work is particularly key—either directly, as Chang et al. (2012) observed, or indirectly as I found in “Oil Rights/Rites.”

*Proposition 3: Positionality*

*Autoethnography can contribute to the ways that we address, build in, and critically engage with positionality in our research (including researching our teaching).* Dutta and Basu (2013) wrote about the ways in which, as researchers, we need to navigate our various positions at any one time, and note that we are seldom ever occupying one position. This is especially true for our work inside the university classroom. How best to negotiate our changing positions, and at the same time recognise when our positioning is, in and of itself, contributing to what is happening are both critical issues. Working on “Oil Rights/Rites” forced me to take a stand on my relationship to oil. As Barrett and Worden (2014a) highlighted, there is a certain invisibility about oil. Having grown up in oil, I never quite knew what to do with the experiences. Digging into boxes of photos and newspaper clippings, I learned things that I didn’t know before or hadn’t paid attention to. In one clipping, I read a journalist’s account of an interview with my father. There is something awkward about it, and I wonder if the journalist put words in my father’s mouth. Now I think of the types of awkward moments that are perhaps silenced in our classrooms when students are forced to take on unpopular positions, or when the nature of the discussion does not allow for shifting a position without losing face. Educators Transforming also contributed to recognising issues of positionality in several ways. There are the obvious points in relation to the doing and producing of the cellphilm from a technical point of view, which necessitated, for example, many of us to position ourselves as co-producers (with our own children or students). We may be able to write an article or paper by ourselves but outside of a selfie context, we needed to work with others. But putting ourselves into the position of performer or director required us to take other positions.

*Proposition 4: Ethics*

*Autoethnography can contribute to the care with which we research and teach (the ethics of doing).* Taking on autoethnographic research, as numerous authors have highlighted, necessitates us to think explicitly about others and their role in our story, or at least to consider whose story it really is (Tullis, 2013). Although it sometimes seems as though research ethics boards (REBs) are there to limit our work, I would argue that engaging in autoethnographic work offers new complexities. On the one hand, this work makes us often realise that REBs do not go far enough in their protection of others and what happens to the other when we take on the role of

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protagonist. At the same time, there may be an over-determined view on what constitutes harm, and perhaps a failure to consider what might constitute benefits. Doing visual research, in itself, brings many challenges, especially in working with family photographs and home videos and there remain many grey areas for obtaining consent. Notwithstanding these grey areas, however, it becomes much more of an immediate issue to consider what their effects will be on various audiences, particularly those who are implicated in some way. When I carried out the fieldwork for “Oil Rights/Rites,” I became aware anew of my own position as the child who was in all the newspaper accounts of the discovery of oil on my father’s farm—simply because I was too young to go to school and my two older brothers were already away at school when the journalists appeared. How would my brothers feel when they read my account?

For *Educators Transforming*, we were conscientious as a group of implicating others particularly because we were working with visual data. Nonetheless, some concerns arose. For example, one person sent a picture of a new baby in the family. Even though we all knew the baby couldn’t give consent, were both the mother and father fine with the image? As Reinikainen and Zetterström Dahlqvist (this volume) observed in relation to curating an exhibition of albums made up of family photos from their own albums and those of various colleagues, even consenting adults sometimes have a difficult time negotiating the ethics of visual display. It is not just that there is visual display; it is where something is going to be displayed, that is an issue. In the case of *Educators Transforming* the video was screened at a national conference in Victoria, Canada. Since that time, I personally have only ever screened my own cellphilm, “Etude.” I would not feel comfortable speaking for others and their autoethnographic intentions. Engaging in autoethnographic work, then, also draws attention to power and, in particular, power in research relationships and communities (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013). Perhaps starting with ourselves, as van Manen (1990) wrote, is the most powerful way to become aware of the ethics of power.

*Proposition 5: Social Justice*

*Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2013) argued that autoethnography helps us turn our attention to “experiences of exclusion, degradation and injustice, and in so doing create work that not only makes the case for change but also embodies the change it calls into being” (p. 669).* This observation by Adams et al. sets an ambitious agenda. How can looking inward, as the various chapters in this book, alongside the essays in such collections as the *Handbook on Autoethnography* proposed, contribute to social change? In the case of the production of “Etude,” I wanted to show that it is perhaps both the medium of doing (exposing myself by creating this rather amateur cellphilm with its spreading the seeds cliché) as well as what I hoped would be an outcome of this work—convincing others in our group that they could do it. If we aren’t prepared to take risks with colleagues then what can we hope to do in our classrooms? It is a small thing, but the preparation—choosing the images that would figure in this piece

that was meant to be artful, practicing the reading aloud of “Transcendental Etude”—and then executing the production (which in the end had to be repeated several times), made me become more aware of the lines I was reading, and also of the movement (blowing the dandelion seeds in the air) I was enacting. For the members of the community of practice who produced photo images of “what has changed” in relation to addressing HIV, there is the obvious challenge of having to make change visible. It was not possible to just talk and say, “Well, this is what we are doing.”

*Proposition 6: Advocacy*

*Autoethnography sets up its own ‘call for action’ in relation to sustainability.* Finally, and as inspired by a call to action proposed by Adams et al. (2013) in the concluding chapter of their *Handbook of Autoethnography*, we might think about the ways in which autoethnography inspires us to take on an activist role in engaging in teaching research. As these authors highlighted, autoethnography as a movement needs to be nurtured and supported. Those of us who see the value of this work need to take on the following activist agenda which, in and of itself, is a critical so-what? in researching and teaching, and especially in relation to the following obligations we have to ensure the future of these endeavours for new researchers and teachers:

- Continue to further establish autoethnography as a rich and viable method for social research by teaching, talking about, and writing autoethnography.
- Support others doing autoethnographic work by reading their work and including it on course syllabi and reading lists.
- Seek funding sources that support qualitative, artistic, and narrative-based research and apply for support for your autoethnographic research projects.
- Recognise and carefully consider critiques of the method. Find ways to address these critiques, or put critiques aside when they come from those who would never believe in autoethnography, and for whom a “good” autoethnography would most likely never exist.
- Turn your attention to the harm being done to us and to others and use autoethnographic research to tell, and right, stories of injustice.
- Write stories of compassion, of solidarity and communion, of change and justice and hope. These stories—your stories—are the future of autoethnography. (Adapted from Adams et al., 2013, p. 676)

To these, I would add two more items that are particularly relevant to South Africa:

- Track down autoethnographies written by other South African scholars and make these very visible in your personal and institutional libraries and bibliographies (see, for example, Grossi, 2006; Richards, 2008; Tomaselli, Dyll-Mykleburst, & van Grootheest, 2013).
- Use the opportunities afforded by the visual (and especially the digital) to make public, visual autoethnographic projects. Cellfilms, digital stories, photo, and

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other art exhibitions drawing on autoethnography need to be brought into the public sphere. Build on structures and mechanisms in places that support the visual (for example, Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change at the University of KwaZulu-Natal), seek out artistic spaces to occupy, and use these spaces to give a public face to autoethnographic work (your own, your colleagues' and your students').

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The question in the introduction (How can autoethnography contribute to teaching in higher education institutions?) is informed by a recognition that higher education in South Africa remains as a contested site. Not nearly enough young people finish school, let alone have access to tertiary education, and so for those who do get to attend university or a university of technology, the support mechanisms (financial and pedagogical) are critical. If we layer over these features the fact that HIV and AIDS and gender-based violence remain on the landscape of higher education, the stakes are even higher. Our own teaching in this landscape matters in terms of how we approach teaching, learning, and supervision. Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007) concluded, in their report to the South Africa Council of Higher Education on university teaching, the following:

Given the high stakes attached to higher education, we argue that it is critical for the sector—particularly the mainstream academic staff who carry the major responsibility for teaching—to come to terms with the profile of the student body that the sector and each institution needs to cater effectively for, in the national interest. If this does not happen, it is likely that there will continue to be a mismatch between what the institutions are prepared to offer and what many students actually need to facilitate their learning. On the other hand, if the realities and obligations of our context are generally accepted in the sector, it could be a real stimulus for recognition of the importance of educational effort and expertise, and hence for creative initiatives that make a substantial difference to the outcomes of the system. (p. 79)

The authors are, of course, speaking of a broad range of issues, ranging from high levels of attrition for first year students, to disappointing levels of completion especially for black students. Although the report shies away from exploring pedagogical practice or what this work might mean in terms of supporting the type of deep engagement with our own storied histories as teachers and researchers, this should not be taken as a deterrent to embracing the call to action proposed by Adams et al. (2013). Indeed, their conclusion that there is a need for creative initiatives nicely frames the six propositions put forward in this chapter in relation to the so-what? of autoethnography in relation to teaching. Engaging in autoethnographic practices, as I

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have tried to show, can contribute to: (1) creativity and doing something different, (2) supporting collaboration in working with colleagues but also potentially supporting collaboration with community members, (3) making concerns of positionality more apparent, (4) taking an ethical stance in our work, (5) addressing issues of social justice, and finally, (6) becoming more committed to taking a stand and embarking upon an activist agenda in relation to recognising the place of looking-inward stories in influencing the wide-angle lens. While there are likely to be other so-what? issues, these six propositions might be taken as a starting point for how we reflect on the effectiveness of autoethnographic work in ways that allow us to look both inward and outward. Ultimately, they should help us “reflect forward” in order to engage anew with our teaching colleagues and students in ways that spread the seeds of change.

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AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A WIDE-ANGLE LENS ON LOOKING (INWARD AND OUTWARD)

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