Self-Reflexive Critique Through Dialogical Exchange as a Mode of Autoethnography

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Abstract

This paper explores reflection in action by explicating the role of self-reflexive critique through dialogical exchange, as a methodological contribution in terms of how we can ‘craft’ (Cunliffe, 2011) modes of doing ethnography and autoethnography (Watson, 2001; 2012; Van Maanen, 2010; Ellis, 2004; 2007). The focus on self-reflexive critique through dialogue draws on the author’s (thereafter, CA1 and CA2) own collaborative work over 12 months (2013-2014). Building on earlier accounts of the role of dialogic exchange in practising and knowing management (Beech et al. 2012) a dialogical approach was developed where the reflexive critique was heightened in dialogue between CA1 and CA2. Central to the dialogue was the provocation that CA1 initiated through asking questions about the experience of CA2 acting as Secretary of Education (thereafter SoE) in a Brazilian municipality. The lived experience of CA2’s service as the SoE, from January 2005 until December 2008, focuses on the judgments and choices made, as well as, actions taken in an effort to deliver ‘democratic education’ in the local Brazilian government. CA2’s appointment as the SoE provided a unique opportunity to temporarily step out of the full time position as Management Professor in a Brazilian Federal University.

Considering ethnography more than a method for researching (Watson, 2012; Brannan et al., 2012), the data that support this study have been “collected” in the form of diary notes but then subsequently “re-collected” in two phases that comprised the dialogical exchange, thus providing a longitudinal account of the unfolding reflexivity over time. Firstly, data were collected drawing on rich personal diary notes during the 4 year period of service as the SoE. Mindful of the scholarly background of CA2, it was a conscious decision at the time to use diaries as a way of collecting data about critical incidents especially where calls to judgments were most prominent. In so doing, these notes generated ethnographic narratives, based on everyday participant observations (Watson, 2011; 2012; 2001), both as the SoE and an engaged scholar as well (Van de Ven, 2007; Watson, 1982).

Secondly, the “re-collection” of data was possible by practising self-reflexive critique in dialogue, which resulted in an ‘auto-ethnographic reflexive narrative’ (Ellis, 2004). Informed by previous analysis of reflexive critique as a mode of supporting learning and the development of a more active recognition of the impact of practical judgments (phronesis) (Antonacopoulou, 2010), the self-reflexive critique as a method emerged as a further advancement of both reflection and action. This draws on Freire’s (1973) notion of ‘conscientisation’ (i.e. a critical reading of commonsense reality) in fostering a phronetic approach to practising (Antonacopoulou, 2008). In other words, the possibility of talking and being ‘challenged’ in dialogue with others provides a way of re-living experiences. The degree of distancing the dialogical approach allows for, draws our as part of the self-reflexive account, the judgments that underpin the choices made in following a particular course of action. This focus on choices and judgments goes beyond merely justifying action taking. It invites a critical reassessment of one’s engagement in performing their practices guided not so much by cognition or emotion but by the ways in which the senses inform the approach to sense-making (Antonacopoulou, 2014).

The self-reflexive dialogical approach presented in this paper as a method seeks to extend hitherto accounts of reflexive autoethnographic analysis (Ellis, 2004). The
method developed by the co-authors extended beyond merely inviting a re-reading of ethnographic narratives. It involved a re-writing of the story that ethnographic narratives were communicating. Such re-writing opened up the space for the “voices from the past” – the ‘others’ (Ellis, 2007) – people whom CA2 worked with – Head-teachers, Teachers, Pupils, Pupils’ Parents, Educational Union Leaders and the wider local Community of the municipality to be heard. In other words, the ethnographic narratives where no longer just an account of CA2’s story as a SoE. In revisiting CA2’s lived experience, the self-reflexive dialogical approach made room to arrest those unheard critical voices. These previous silent voices of the others in the ethnographic narrative, enabled both further clarity and justification for the actions taken as well as, a re-positioning of the underlying judgments that guided the actions taken. As a result, the self-reflexive dialogical approach became a catalyst for re-writing the story the earlier autoethnographic accounts were telling. The self-reflexive narrative that emerged in the course of the dialogical approach adopted provided deeper explanations of how practices (in this case managing) are performed.

In practising self-reflexive critique, both co-authors experienced tension and vulnerability but the approach of dialogic exchange developed also offered progressively the necessary safety to accommodate the crisis in learning they each experienced (Antonacopoulou, 2014).

In summary, the contribution of this paper is that it shows the importance of subjectivities from lived experiences being captured through ‘crafting’ (Cunliffe, 2011) modes of doing ethnographic research and the importance of self-reflexive autoethnographic accounts in arresting critical moments that highlight beyond action, the judgments and choices made in practising managing.
References


