Feeling your way forward: Questions about autoethnography, embodiment and sensemaking

As authors and dancers, we describe and analyse our journey of discovery in leadership and followership, which has led to the development of a series of workshops to help others on their own journeys (Matzdorf 2005, Matzdorf & Sen 2005, Matzdorf & Sen 2014).

Our personal journey of discovery is both in (amateur) ballroom dancing, and also in leadership and followership in our working lives. It includes noticing parallels, analysis of our experience, reflecting on the systemic parallels, and feeding this back into our dance learning (which has become more sophisticated as a result), as well as feeding back into leadership/followership in organisational contexts, both from a practitioner’s and an academic’s viewpoint. So our professional journey(s) and our dance journey(s) have been one big process of cross-fertilization.

Part of learning to dance competitively at a high level has been learning to reconnect to our bodies, to our senses, to make sense of our own actions and each other's re/actions. It has proven impossible to produce a high level performance without embodiment, without 'being in the moment', being with one's partner, constantly monitoring their body with one’s own, whether as leader or follower, whilst still performing one’s own role, and not getting lost in that monitoring.

This experience has had a serious impact on our working lives, where each of us in their own role realised that there were strong parallels and useful lessons to be applied. Interestingly, when we were invited to share some of these discoveries, we found that our stories, our demonstrations, and the opportunity to ‘try things out for themselves’ made sense to others and helped their understanding of their roles in their own organisations. This approach is different from a lot of management training, which tends to pick out individual skills/tasks/competencies and focus on them in a seemingly rational, often utilitarian way, providing ‘toolkits’ to achieve simple cause-and-effect chains.

We are using dance as a metaphor for leader/follower relationships, but at the same time also as a ‘real thing’ in its own right: an experience of leadership/followership - a context which poses tasks/challenges such as decision making, relationship building, building trust, leading, following, listening, responding, initiating, navigating, planning etc. in a real-time situation. These are all activities that happen in organisational life as well as in dance and thus offer the opportunity to explore those parallels and, as a result, to develop transferable skills. The tricky bit is that these things have to happen concurrently, not sequentially in a neat chronological order - that's the messiness of 'real life' (Tomkins & Eatough 2013). People 'think on their feet', ie make decisions with and through their bodies and emotions, as well as their minds (Jordi 2010, Finlay 2006), - so this is an opportunity to explore one's own actions, reactions, behaviours and behavioural patterns.

Bringing these experiences into a learning context, we aim to facilitate “processes of integration through reflection” (Jordi 2010), but also “organic emergence of conscious meaning” (ibid.) and “non-conceptual dimensions” (ibid.) - in other words, bringing the senses into the process of sensemaking.

If this learning point requires immersing oneself into the experience (Stelter 2008a)… what does this mean for ethnographic methods (Tomkins & Eatough 2013)? Do workshop participants need to watch a video or look at a hologram? How can we ‘capture’ the 4-dimensionality of our experience to communicate it to others? One way of doing it is to ‘immerse’ others in a similar situational context to enable them to have a similar experience. Another way is to give presentations with practical demonstrations and/or ‘audience participation’ at conferences, rather than just relying on paper-writing.
We explore the limitations of research as communication: translating ‘concurrent’ into ‘sequential’, action into words, takes out immediacy and possibility for ‘thinking on your feet’, and the use of auto-ethnography and sensory ethnography (Nakamura 2013).

Nakamura discusses how sensory ethnography has attempted to address and involve an array of senses: the visual, olfactory, auditory… Interestingly, the one sense that seems to be conspicuously missing from her discussion of trends and possibilities in sensory ethnography is touch…. which is the one sense that, in our view, has made the biggest difference to both our own learning journey and the ‘leadership-followership practice’ concept that we have developed through this.

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References:


Jordi, R. 2010, "Reframing the concept of reflection: Consciousness, experiential learning, and reflective learning practices", Adult Education Quarterly, , pp. 0741713610380439.


