THE LEARNER DEVELOPMENT JOURNAL
学習者ディベロップメント研究部会誌

ISSN: 2433-5401
https://ldjournal.ld-sig.org

The Learner Development Journal Issue 7:
Challenging the Conventions of Learner Development Research

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Title: Why I Utilize Autoethnography to Promote Learner Development: A Reflexive Narrative of English Teacher Development

Date of publication online: 2023

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.LDJ7-7

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Published by the Japan Association for Language Teaching
Learner Development Special Interest Group, Tokyo
https://ld-sig.org/
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This article can be cited as:

Harrison, M. E. (2023). Why I utilize autoethnography to promote learner development: A reflexive narrative of English teacher development. *The Learner Development Journal, 7*, 118–127. https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.LDJ7-7

This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of "Challenging the Conventions in Learner Development Research" for Issue 7 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ7), edited by Ellen Head, Aya Hayasaki, and Ryo Moriya. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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ARTICLE

Why I Utilize Autoethnography to Promote Learner Development: A Reflexive Narrative of English Teacher Development

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The last two decades of learner development scholarship have seen an expansion in applications of autoethnography, a qualitative research method that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2010). This article traces the evolution of my understanding of autoethnography, from my first exposure to autoethnography as a reader, through utilization of this genre as a research tool, to a position of advocacy of the value of autoethnographic writing as a practice for both teachers and learners in writing classrooms around the world. Through a series of written vignettes, I utilize narrative inquiry to highlight my openness to cultural exploration in the English language classroom, explore my tendency to utilize lived experience in academic contexts, and illustrate how this manifested in a critical expressivist curriculum for my university English writing classrooms in Japan, Finland, and the United States.

過去20年間の学習者の成長に関する研究において、「文化的経験を理解するために個人の経験を記述し、体系的に分析しようとする」（Ellis et al., 2011）質的研究の一手法であるオートエスノグラフィーの活用が拡がりを見せている。そのため、この教師の成長に関する自省的なオートエスノグラフィーは、ある英語ライティングの指導者が世界中のライティング教室でオートエスノグラフィーに触れ、活用してきた変遷を辿るものである。一連のヴィネットを通して、ナラティブ的探求を活用し、英語教室における文化探訪に対する私の開放性を強調し、アカデミックな文脈で生きた経験を活用する私の傾向を探り、そしてこのことが、日本、フィンランド、アメリカにおける私の大学英語ライティングの授業で、批判的表現主義カリキュラムにどのように顕れたかを説明する。

Keywords

autoethnography, learner development, teacher development, narrative inquiry, research writing

オートエスノグラフィー、学習者の成長、教師の成長、ナラティブ的探究、リサーチライティング

Introduction

> Teachers’ professional knowledge is said to be storied. This means that teachers have stories of particular students, classes, and classroom events in their memory and that these stories are thought to form a network. Faced with a new situation, teachers search for similar stories in this network and decide on a course of action based on the stories in their repertoire. If this is the nature of teachers’ knowledge, telling stories of their own experience and listening to other teachers’ stories should facilitate teacher development. (Aoki, 2012, p. 36)

The last two decades of learner development scholarship have seen an expansion in applications of autoethnography, a qualitative research method that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis et al., 2010). The education field, specifically, has seen a shift in the focus of this method from largely professional development purposes for educators (Bayne et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2020; Long, 2008; Spenceley, 2011) to inquiry around learner development. For example, Mynard (2020) recommends autoethnography as a method to investigate student

self-access language learning; Alm & Ohashi (2020) use autoethnography to analyze the interrelationship of their experiences as foreign language learners, educators, and researchers; and Sah's (2019) critical autoethnographic study explores his English language learning and adjustment difficulties in the UK.

Aoki (2012) explains above that a teacher's professional knowledge is said to be storied. In this case, it can be beneficial for instructors to share their own *lived experiences*, defined by Chandler and Munday as "personal knowledge gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people" (Chandler & Munday, 2020, p. 594). As a published writer and English language instructor with two decades of classroom experience, I would like to invite you now into my own lived stories of teacher development for they also double as stories of learner development. I encourage the reader to reflect on their own experiences while reading these stories, and consider how they might inform their teaching practices.

Journeys of Self-Inquiry

I first encountered autoethnography in 2006 when I served as a graduate teaching assistant in an ESL section of College Writing at a North American university. The instructor intended for students to experiment with language and expression via the creation of a collection of poetry. That poetry was then used as the evidence for an end of term, *self-reflexive* autoethnography (the research paper) about the student's cultural identity and experiences. By *reflexive*, McCarthy explains this kind of narrative as a "journey of self-inquiry toward self-realization…looking back at something in order to see oneself emerging. The unfolding narrative connects the researcher to their world" (McCarthy, quoted in Johns, 2019, p. 19).

Having also trained as an expressive arts therapist in my 20s just prior to the beginning of my teaching career in English, I was impressed by the utilization of both creativity and reflexive narrative as valid academic practices in this ESL writing course. And as a proponent of *bibliotherapies* and *scriptotherapies* (Moy, 2017), or reading and writing practices for therapeutic purposes, I felt inspired to achieve similar self-reflexive experiences and outcomes with my own students. For example, I have been routinely drawn to storytelling as a way of exploring challenging or difficult experiences, both as a client in therapy and as a practitioner. For a good 15 years, a pen and writing journal helped me better process and explore the world around me and my place within it; writing became a way to make connections and glimpse possibilities. As such, that end of term paper was the closest I had come to experiencing an intersection of my background as therapist, instructor, and writer, and it had occurred to me that language students could enjoy the same kind of transformational learning epiphanies (Yacek & Gary, 2020) through writing that can typically occur in more introspective, self-analytical contexts such as talk therapy settings. Interestingly, epiphanies, or "remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life" (Ellis et al., 2010) are often the subject of many autobiographies and autoethnographies.

Since that time, as I have continued to present the autoethnographic research paper as an option across a range of teaching contexts, I have begun to develop a keener understanding of why this approach to qualitative inquiry resonates so strongly, and with multilingual writers in particular. A focus on one's lived experiences and how those experiences connect in meaningful ways can also allow for experimentation with expression, language, audience, and form. For example, in this self-reflexive

autoethnography of teacher development I will trace the evolution of my own exposure to and utilization of autoethnography in English writing classrooms. In essence, this is my own learner narrative of how I came to adopt this method. As such, this paper will proceed as a series of written vignettes where I highlight my own discursive orientation to creative expression, explore my tendency to utilize lived experience in academic contexts, and illustrate how this manifested in my own process expressivist curricula (Roeder & Gatto, 2014) for my English writing classrooms in Japan, Finland, and the United States.

Japan: The Birth of My Writing Pedagogy

The first time I taught English writing was in Osaka in 2003 to a classroom of two advanced Japanese university students who had just returned from studying abroad. Despite my own Spanish and French foreign language education in the 1980s and 1990s South Florida public school system, I never enjoyed an oral or written proficiency of the kind that these students displayed. At this time in my English teaching career (year two in Japan), I had only a developing knowledge of language acquisition, second language writing, and composition pedagogy theories. When it came to teaching writing, a textbook would have to be my first teacher. But I remember wondering, "So what exactly is the purpose of this Academic English writing course? Am I meant to teach language? Expository writing? Creative writing? Professional writing?"

A popular practice for part-time English teachers at that time in Japan was to set the syllabus on the first day of class together with the students (see Clarke, 1991, on the "negotiated syllabus"). This was partially a practical choice as one could never really guess who might show up as a student or what their proficiency levels might be, and partially because often one never knew what they might be teaching until a week before the term began. About those two students: Naoko had just returned from a year in Ohio and Toshi from a year in Toronto (pseudonyms). They could both read, write, speak, and listen at an advanced level, and both desired to return to their English-speaking contexts in the future. "What would you like to learn?" I inquired.

Together, we agreed to focus on practical documents such as resumes, emails, and application letters for summer educational programs requiring mission statements and personal narratives. The textbook I selected provided writing exercises and activities such as writing movie reviews and personal success stories that would scaffold the eventual practical documents, while I relied heavily on my own writing practices as a student and published journalist to emphasize writing as a process of invention, drafting, feedback, and revision. I enjoyed the teaching, and began to understand the value of personal connection to learning activities.

The following semester, I was assigned "Reading and Writing" courses with two large groups of first-year English majors. My first awakening was to the proficiency differences of these 50 students compared to Naoko and Toshi. I crafted a reading syllabus focused on graded readers of classic popular texts (*Dracula, Frankenstein*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*) along with reading comprehension and reader response activities utilizing newspaper and magazine articles. The corresponding writing portion of this 2-term progression then had students move to developing their own printed class magazine working in teams based on everyday cultural interests (e.g., sports, food, book, and entertainment reviews).

Looking back now, as a journalist and former therapist, I'm not at all surprised that I would lean so heavily into process expressivist and phenomenological approaches, or that

I would select a magazine filled with experience-based reviews as a thematic frame for the course; I can see how my own literacy experiences and preferences directly influenced my ideas about English language learning and pedagogy.

USA: My Introduction to Autoethnography

My introduction to autoethnography happened just a few years later in 2006 when I began my doctoral studies in English Composition and TESOL as I noted above. After that first ESL writing course experience, I understood that autoethnography could legitimize a first-person narrative approach in academic inquiry while still fulfilling the requirements of a traditional research paper genre. After all, autoethnography utilizes aspects of autobiography (writing about oneself and one's history) and ethnography (writing about cultural experience, beliefs, and practices), and the self-reflective process is often just as significant as the final product (Ellis et al., 2010). But as I had only seen it used by international students to examine their language and poetry, I was curious about other applications. I needed to use it myself.

My first experience writing an autoethnography was for an independent study exploring the semiotics and performance of naming and identity; I had been a "perfume critic," or beauty writer, and explored the evolution of this identity via short stories reflective of my cultural experiences growing up around fragrance and then later, professionally as an online journalist (Harrison, 2021, October 3). Next, in my doctoral ESL Teaching seminar, I used autoethnographic storytelling to explore my experiences teaching English in Japan as a self-identified queer man, and the challenges I faced positioning myself and identifying queer-inclusive teaching materials (Harrison, 2022, May 26). In both cases I was writing both autobiography (stories from my life) and ethnography (cultural exploration), and indeed, the processes of self-exploration and self-discovery were just as significant as the finished papers.

I was smitten. It was as if I had found a form of academic research that doubled as personal and therapeutic inquiry. In my other doctoral courses, I was still performing the traditional, hegemonic, author-evacuated, pseudo-objective academic research papers, and the difference between the two approaches in terms of my personal investment and emotional experience was striking. My next challenge was to consider how I might use autoethnography with my own students.

In the fall of 2007, I taught my first US-based "Freshman Composition" college course to a classroom of local English-speaking writers, now having had the benefit of previously teaching in Japan, my ESL assistantship in the USA, and coursework in theory and pedagogy. The result was a phenomenological journey using the five senses as writing prompts where students could experiment with genre, rhetoric, language, and audience. This culminated in a self-reflexive autoethnography that used their coursework as evidence to explore the significance of culture in their lives (see Messekher et al., 2010 to learn more about this humanizing pedagogy). In this paper, students pursued the question "What is I?" by using their written coursework as evidence to support their assertions. Students were pleasantly surprised by the invitation to be present in their college-level writing, and their final course paper at that. Feedback suggested that they were eager to write about their own lived experiences and previous writing; not just write about them, but also make sense of them.

In early 2008, I drafted my dissertation proposal to examine the crossroads of human sexuality and linguistic proficiency, responding to a Japanese acquaintance's claim that

he was "gay in English, but not in Japanese." I had used that summer of 2008 to do some guest lecturing and preliminary interviews with potential participants in Japan. By the end of that summer, I had concluded in a post on my research blog that autoethnography could be an appropriate method for my study:

> During the first two interviews that took place as an attempt at preliminary information gathering, I began to imagine that instead of quantitative research it might be more interesting to focus on the qualitative, that is, to focus on the conversations that ensue with the participants. However, I also noticed that the information being gathered during these conversations, whether or not the intention of my interviews, took the form of stories. As I tried to understand the stories, I thought that perhaps it would be much more useful to counsel the participants in self-reflection than to simply interpret the stories myself. After all, if I am the lone interpreter, what might be missing from the research and analyses? This leads me to a consideration of autoethnographic approaches to collecting data whereby the participants share their own stories and reflect on both the content and process. This approach of situating oneself and one's behavior within a specific cultural context in order to answer a question or address a specific phenomenon now seems appropriate considering my own experiences writing autoethnography, my freshman composition curriculum, and the fact that it might allow me to weave a narrative of my own second language experiences throughout the dissertation. (Harrison, 2008, July 2)

In the above, we can clearly see how my past experiences and identification as a potential member of the research community lead me once again to autoethnography. By autumn I had changed my research methodology to autoethnography. I added:

> I would like to ask my participants to complete their own autoethnographies – to tell their stories and to reflect on the meanings inherent in the stories. Afterall, I find significant my interviewee's own surprise at how "interesting" the questions I've posed have been, and even more significant that they felt as if they were "learning" about themselves through the interview process. **Reflection itself should be a key tool in examining the significance of English experiences in the lives of queer Japanese and may reveal more than the stories themselves.** (Harrison, 2008, July 2; emphasis added in bold)

I now find that final sentence to be quite profound. I began to understand how *reflexivity* (as mentioned earlier; see McCarthy in Johns, 2013), or metacognition, can be a powerful step in autoethnography, especially analytical autoethnography where evidence is not just created but analyzed (Anderson, 2006); such contextualizing and self-analysis creates a sense of investment for writers as well as an opportunity for increased awareness (Aoki & Hamakawa, 2003). I feel fortunate that all 10 of my participants successfully composed English-language autoethnographies, sometimes integrating their native tongue and sometimes writing first in Japanese and then translating to English, that reflected their lived experiences as queer men and women as well as bilingual English and Japanese users.

Moreover, I included in my thesis my own stories of navigating my sexuality in a second language setting into the dissertation, becoming a participating member of the research community rather than a silent outsider. I had observed and mentored autoethnography, taught autoethnography, and written personal autoethnography, but this was my first time participating both as researcher and as a part of a research community.

Finland: Autoethnography and Advanced English Learners

In 2010, I completed my doctoral program and took a position at a language center at a Finnish university. With autoethnography now serving as one of my academic specializations, I was offered an opportunity to lead a workshop for advanced researchers and faculty while concurrently teaching English academic communication courses to international undergraduate and master's students. I had taught English language learners and I had taught research courses, but I had never taught research courses to advanced English language learners. "Could autoethnography help?" I wondered.

I envisioned the majority of my courses as independent research experiences. Depending on the level and course, they were more or less geared to the basics of research writing in English-language academic contexts, and an exploration of related professional and academic communications such as abstracts, conference presentations, and so forth. Following the strong investment that I had witnessed with both my previous students and dissertation participants, I reasoned that my new students – half of whom were Finnish and the other half a diverse array of international students – might also enjoy connecting lived experience to English writing assignments and that such connection would support investment in their language learning. I envisioned my pedagogy as a "bridging approach," connecting students' personal passions and experiences with their professional interests (Harrison et al., 2013). For example, a student who was interested in counseling psychology and photography explored her photography as a way of understanding how she sees herself. Utilizing her own photographs, personal reflections, and peer-reviewed scholarship, Maria (pseudonym) discovered that she had unintentionally developed an art therapy process to support her self-esteem around physical appearance.

What these new student autoethnographers routinely reported was first and foremost a sense of surprise regarding the legitimization of first-person voice in Western academic scholarship, much like my US-based international college writers earlier. For many this was a challenging linguistic and stylistic departure from the kinds of third-person, author-evacuated writing (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010) they had been previously taught.

Moreover, students reported a level of investment in their projects that transcended anxieties about language use itself. I'd like to further explore this, but perhaps autoethnography also served as a tool to promote a more positive learning mindset. One Finnish autoethnographer, an undergraduate psychology student, explained:

> Because of the bridging approach, investment and agency both grew. It started when I decided my research topic. When personal issue was connected to learning academic English, I started to invest on it … Because [my] study became so close to me in different areas in life, investment was important. I started to be an agent of my own learning instead of a receiver. (Harrison et al., 2013, p. 13)

In the same article, I go on to explain how numerous other writers mentioned their surprise at how their English language acquisition, improvement, confidence, and repertoire increased throughout the project. Moreover, these writers noted their additional surprise that they actually forgot they were studying English because the focus was on the project, not the language. For example, Reetta explains:

> I was pregnant during the course, so I decided to do an autoethnography about identity transformation and pregnancy. This kind of approach was brilliant, because my personal and professional interests were combined. **I got so excited about my**

> **own project that I didn't realize I was studying English.** (Harrison et al., 2013, p. 17, emphasis added in bold)

I think Reeta's conclusion gets to the heart of my assertion in this manuscript: Connecting oneself to one's writing activities, especially in academia, can be an enjoyable way to support language acquisition and practice. Perhaps that was why this approach was so successful with the other international students I had worked with; autoethnography gave them the chance to write reflexively, to make sense of themselves as poets, writers, communicators, and most importantly, as culturally-embedded performers, actors on a stage with an audience (see Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956). It seems sense of purpose and engagement with the writing eclipsed anxieties about ability or language use. Additionally, being able to write themselves into their work and acknowledge that yes, their experience matters, also serves as a validation of the various identities being explored.

Conclusion

At this project's inception, I had initially intended to examine some of the theoretical orientations of instructors who use autoethnography in language learning settings to support learner development. However, workshopping this manuscript with experienced colleagues from the Learner Development special interest group and a reconsidering of my own writerly goals have led me to crafting an autoethnographic reflexive narrative of teacher development, a "looking back at something in order to see oneself emerging" (Johns, 2019, p. 19), and as an opportunity to answer Aoki's (2012) call for teachers to share their stories.

I had previously understood that I enjoy and embrace autoethnography due to my own penchant for narrative storytelling and analysis, a preference that was born during my own student experiences in adolescence and reinforced throughout my professional life as a journalist and therapist. I had a hunch that students appreciated autoethnography due to the ability to write in first-person and explore their own lived experiences and expertise. But this paper has presented an opportunity to more deeply explore my journey as an autoethnography instructor and some of the reasons why I have been drawn to the method, as well as deepen my understanding of why advanced language learning students have embraced this method.

Autoethnography as a method legitimizes my ability as a writer to both utilize my personal lived experience and to write in first-person. It capitalizes on my insider knowledge to inform others about the cultures of teaching and learning that I have participated in. Rather than forcing an impossible objectivity, autoethnography allows for an examination of my subjectivities as a member of the global culture of English education. It allows me to not only make sense of cultural experience, but personal experience as well, for one informs the other. This supports a better understanding of how and why I utilize autoethnography to promote learner development in my English writing and research classrooms. And as one who has been learning how to teach, how to connect to students, and how to find my strengths as a writing instructor throughout these last 20 years, this autoethnography has allowed me to share my journey of self-inquiry towards self-realization, connecting my various experiences as writer, therapist, instructor, and researcher.

After many months of conceptualizing, developing, workshopping, and revising this manuscript, I now can see that as a *product* it highlights how instructors inherit discourses

of education while being presented with opportunities to question, challenge, subvert, and personalize their curriculum and pedagogical approaches. And in my case, at least, my personalization is strongly aligned with my literacy history and interests in creative expression, self-analysis, and cultural inquiry.

In a sense, the creation of this manuscript, along with the discursive workshopping that participating in LDJ7 has involved (author-to-author discussion, proofreading, and provision of feedback), has served as an opportunity for exploring the creative *processes* of autoethnographic reflective practice and narrative inquiry in my own teacher development. In the words of my Learner Development colleague Andrew Barfield, perhaps this manuscript is an example of a new kind of "critical inclusive practitioner research." Future scholarship might continue exploring the uses of autoethnography and narrative inquiry as methods for critical professional reflection and development in learner and teacher development contexts. How do we use these methods individually and collaboratively? What professional and critical insights might such self-reflexive writing offer? What can we gain when instructors take to the keyboard to carry out the kinds of activities required of their learners?

Review Process

This article was open peer-reviewed by Dominic Edsall and Stacey Vye of the Learner Development Review Network. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.*)

Author Bio

Dr. Marlen Elliot Harrison is an instructor in the fields of English and Education Research, and the founder and Editor-in-chief of the award-winning *The AutoEthnographer Literary and Arts Magazine*. Marlen's autoethnographic writing has appeared in a variety of outlets including *Writing on the Edge*, *The Qualitative Report*, and *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. As a journalist, Marlen was the managing editor of the international beauty website, *Fragrantica*, and contributor to numerous popular publications. As an academic and cultural researcher, Marlen has worked with the Smithsonian, the Japan Association for Language Teaching, and universities worldwide. Marlen is currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), New Hampshire, USA. After calling Japan, UK, Malta, and Finland home, he now lives in Florida with his husband and dog. Learn more at https://marlenharrison.com.

Dr. Marlen Elliot Harrisonは英語・教育研究分野の講師、The AutoEthnographer Literary and Arts Magazineの創設者・編集長である。MarlenのオートエスノグラフィーはWriting on the Edge、The Qualitative Report、Qualitative Research in Psychologyをはじめとする様々な媒体で掲載されている。ジャーナリストとして国際的な美容のウェブサイトFragranticaの編集を手がけ、数多くの著名な出版誌への寄稿経験があるほか、学術・文化の研究者として、Smithsonian、the Japan Association for Language Teachingや世界各国の大学での経歴を持つ。現在、米国ニューハンプシャー州のSouthern New Hampshire Universityにて芸術修士を取得中。日本、英国、マルタ、祖国フィンランドを経て、現在は夫・犬とフロリダに在住。詳細はこちらから：https://marlenharrison.com

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