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7. The Autoethnography Project

Overview

In this chapter, I will offer an analysis of the autoethnography assignment and give detailed consideration to student examples from my classroom. After this overview and analysis, I will use the remaining chapters to outline a step-by-step process for teaching the paper using assignments and techniques for weaving all of the elements together.

Defining Autoethnography

In the social sciences, there has long been a debate over criteria for traditional ethnography and alternative or evocative ethnography. In recent years, social scientists have sought a more inclusive model that allows for relaxing some of the rigid scientific constraints of ethnography in favor of the impact of more literary forms.

In "Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally About Our Lives," Carolyn Ellis describes her gradual departure from traditional sociological methods into an approach that is more personally meaningful. She achieves this balance in her writing by using multiple voices, starting and restarting to establish her point of view through both analysis and storytelling. "I made myself begin again in an autoethnographic voice that concentrates on telling a personal, evocative story to provoke others' stories and adds blood and tissue to the abstract bones of the theoretical discourse" (117). Throughout the piece, she clearly establishes a point of view, which she emphasizes in many of her works about
autoethnography, “I think that sociology can be emotional, personal, therapeutic, interesting, engaging, evocative, reflexive, helpful, concrete, and connected to the world of everyday experience” (120). She aims to be true to her feelings, move away from time ordered structures and convey her emotions (128).

Ellis draws on interviews, notes, conversations, and diaries to construct her writing and seeks to find herself in the context of a larger world. “The inner workings of the self must be investigated in reciprocal relationship with the other: concrete action, dialogue, emotion, and thinking are featured, but they are represented within relationships and institutions, very much impacted by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, thought, and language” (133).

She seeks to find value in autoethnography through the impact it has on her audience. “A story’s ‘validity’ can be judged by whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible; the story’s generalizability can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience” (133). She believes that by sharing stories this way, we open up a world that allows others to share their stories (134).

In her piece “Evaluating Ethnography,” Laurel Richardson examines the divide that has persisted between literary and scientific writing (253). This is similar to the division that has existed between academic and personal writing. She notes the “oxymoronic” naming of genres that have tried to bridge this gap, thus blurring distinctions among categories such as “creative nonfiction; faction; ethnographic fiction; the nonfiction novel; and true fiction” (253). And she seeks to lay out the criteria she uses to judge ethnography’s success.

In attempting to create new standards that allow writers to move more freely in their ethnographic work, Richardson establishes the following as important evaluative criteria. She believes the work should: make a substantive contribution, have aesthetic merit, have reflexivity, make an impact, and express a reality (254). In this way, Richardson intends to show the related nature of scientific research and creative expression.

Arthur Bochner responds to Richardson in “Criteria Against Ourselves” and sets up his own evaluation criteria for what he terms “alternative ethnography,” another name often assigned to ethnography that deviates from traditional social science norms. He sees alternative ethnographies as “narratives of the self” that “extract meaning from experience rather than depict experience exactly as it was lived” (270). When looking at this personal writing, he wants abundant concrete detail, structurally complex narratives, emotional credibility, a tale of two selves, and ethical self-consciousness (270-71).

In these three pieces, we can see how social sciences have laid a path for our work in composition studies, to examine the value of the personal and use traditional modes of research to flesh out the narrative of the self.

The Autoethnography

One of the biggest problems with teaching ethnographic writing can be having students understand their own positionality in the research being conducted. For this reason, in my own classroom I have decided that a form of autoethnography provides one of the clearest ways not only to analyze a subculture or aspect of society but also to investigate one’s involvement in that community. I define autoethnography in this case as a qualitative investigation of a subculture the writer is currently involved in. Students are asked to analyze their position in the subculture as well as the positioning of others and how this affects attitudes. Autoethnographic analysis in this case includes interviewing other
members of the subculture, conducting field observation, analyzing textual materials, investigating histories, and engaging in self-reflection. Previous involvement in or attachment to the subculture gives students a vested interest in the project, a sense of authority, and a position from which to analyze.

When conducting autoethnographic research, as opposed to traditional ethnographic research, students are somewhat empowered in that their personal involvement enables them to start out with a certain amount of knowledge about the subculture they are investigating. At the same time, because it is necessary for them to explain the subculture to those who are unfamiliar with it, they must learn how to translate their knowledge to an outside audience. In addition, when conducting observations they need to look at the subculture afresh and describe elements they have taken for granted. They must account for rituals, language and subtleties that make it operate as something unique and situated. By interviewing members of the subculture who inhabit a different position, they are confronted with new perspectives from insiders that will help them to further articulate their own ideas and question their own authority in communicating exactly what the subculture is. Interviewing and conducting observations both empowers them and decenters them from their own experience, forcing them into a position of questioning and representation to an intended audience (their instructor and their classmates, who will see this writing at multiple stages).

Asking students to draw on visceral experiences as well as textual evidence complicates their analysis and keeps them constantly involved in what is being communicated. Students come out with a richer understanding of the subculture, an ethical responsibility to convey its multiple facets and to avoid being reductive. This often has the effect of increasing students’ understanding and involvement in the subculture and produces a new appreciation for an activity that perhaps had been an unexamined part of their lives outside the classroom. In this way, the writing carries an impact that extends beyond the scope of the assignment and its evaluation against classroom standards.

In “Making the Personal Political,” Stacy Holman Jones points out the major differences between telling and showing that are key to successful autoethnographic research. She notes criticism of autoethnography and advocates for performance that not only expresses but employs mimesis, poesis and kinesis, moving from a stage of recognition to action, as performance scholars such as Victor Turner and Dwight Conquergood have suggested. Jones uses stories of her grandfather to show how she was engaged in this kind of autobiographical and autoethnographic knowing and text from an early age. She points out that many of us have been involved in this kind of appropriation of ourselves in texts we have written throughout our lives, making them somewhat autoethnographic even if they were not originally intended that way. It is important to remember, Jones says, that all of these texts are partial views and that is OK: “You can’t do it all, you need to do a version” (760). When students are made aware of their presence in already-constructed texts and the places they currently hold in the subcultures they are investigating, this kind of project can be more organic.

In the classroom, you can show students they are already involved and invested in subcultures but investigating these different versions and helping them recognize that they have an immediate investment in the ethnographic research and potential to develop their perspectives. Making students aware that autoethnographic research involves focus and decision making, like all other writing, allows them to understand they are creating a version and not representing every aspect of their subculture.

For their final projects, my students are required to choose subcultures they are part of or feel connected to. In addition, there must be a field site for the subculture that the students can visit in person at least twice during the semester to make detailed observations. Accessibility is a key factor in that students have only six weeks to conduct the research and analysis necessary to complete their assignments successfully. Any documents related to the subculture are

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Composition/Book%3A_Teaching_Autoethnography_-_Personal_Writing_in_the_Cl...
analyzed and reviewed so that students can work from both written history and their own experiences. Students also are
asked to interview at least two people who hold different positions in the subculture in order to get different perspectives.
They have the opportunity to practice interviewing skills and writing questions to elicit the best information for their
projects. They also have the option of interviewing or surveying people outside of the subculture to incorporate more
positions on it. Again, because of time constraints, they are not required to do this.

Each aspect of the project is conducted as a separate assignment, and students are asked to amass the data in a
portfolio and create a final autoethnographic piece of writing that draws on their accumulated research and analyzes the
process of creating the materials and writing the paper. Analysis of rituals, language and routines is part of these small
assignments, and self-reflection, reflection on the process, and analysis of research are all important elements of the
final project.

Requiring students to investigate a subculture in which they are involved enables them to choose from among many
different topics. Some students chose subcultures that are very personal and involve family, friends and religion, while
others prefer to study school clubs, hobbies or neighborhoods. In each case, students can pursue a topic that interests
them and increase their understanding of the subculture while staying within their comfort zone.

Student project topics have included “cosplay” (costumed role-playing), singles culture, and specific academic clubs.
The two projects I have chosen to discuss are striking because they are strong examples of an evolution that can
happen during this kind of research. Each involves a subculture that has had a major impact on the student’s life, yet
each student had not had any sort of formal opportunity to reflect on this impact. The two writers reflect on subcultures
that involve family members, giving an immediacy to the writing and analysis. Here I give an overview of the student
projects, excerpts from their writing and analysis of the process of each student.

Sheila

Sheila decided that her autoethnographic project was a great opportunity to investigate a subculture that she had been
involved with as something of an outsider for her entire life. Her her brother, her father and their large friend group,
which spent a lot of time at Sheila’s home, engaged in drag racing. Sheila had always been present but not involved in
the activities surrounding it. It was mostly the domain of the men in her family, and while she was not a direct observer
or participant in the racing, the drag racers, their friends, and the conversations and lives of her father and brother
affected every aspect of Sheila’s daily life.

Starting the project, Sheila had hesitation and curiosity. She thought it would be a great opportunity to participate, but
with a degree of distance. Sheila had always wanted to know more about the subculture but found she had no real
excuse to enter it. She talked to her father about going to an event one night, and to her surprise he was very excited
about the prospect . What happened that night was the catalyst for Sheila’s paper and her final performance piece.

In preparation for her project, Sheila conducted interviewed her father, brother, sister, and two friends who were also
involved in drag racing. She also solicited opinions from people outside the subculture for perspective analysis. Her
research culminated in observation of a race with all of the preparation and aftermath. Her interviews, observations and
final paper all share a common awareness of her place as both outsider and insider with respect to the subculture. Her
final paper starts with a kind of blunt factual interaction between her and her father, and it shows her constant reflection
on her position while conducting the research. She moves between narration and observation, bringing us into the story
while making us aware that she is outside of it.

November 28, 2007 and it’s 10:45 p.m. ‘Sheila, come on. There’s a race going on tonight,’ my father says grinning. I’ve been asking him if a race will ever happen before my project is due, so I know that he’s happy I can get off his back. I rush to put on my sneakers and coat because I’m so excited and I don’t want to miss anything. I walk to the window in front of my house, and I see a crowd of over fifteen people. Seeing all of the people outside of my house made me realize that a race will happen. ‘Make sure you have your camera and everything,’ my dad blurts out. Quickly I run back to my room to get my camera, but when I reach back to the window in the front of my house, no one is there.…

It’s brisk and very cold. It’s dark out, with a little light coming from the street lights that line my block. With my pen and pad in hand, I take a seat on the stoop in front of my house. I see about four cars pull up, there’s a group of ten males, and they come to my right. One of them is very loud and active. My dad is sitting down on the opposite side of the stoop, so all of the guys stand around him. ‘He got the break. You gotta put the money up.’ he screamed. ‘What is that about?’ I ponder. I have no clue. ‘Gimme my money,’ he blurs out. ‘Stop bitching’ follows. I observe and listen to what he says. As I write some of what he says in my note pad, some people in the group of guys look at me and then turn away. A few minutes passed and I realize that the group moved further away. They were on the sidewalk when I first came out to observe, now they’re practically in the middle of the street.…

I focus on a group of seven different males to my left, in the middle of the street. The scent of cigarettes fill my nostrils. One of the guys looks at me as I write, so I stop. When he looks away I continue. As I write, my leg starts to shake.

Sheila’s writing is filled with a kind of immediacy. It’s easy to see her thinking through the process as she writes: her circumstances, identity through cultural markers, language, actions. She in constantly present and aware in all aspects of her writing, and the people she writes about are constantly aware of her, whether her father is telling her to get her camera or a guy is staring her down as she writes notes on him.

This project is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which is that Sheila’s family, participating in illegal drag racing, never actually gets to race. Instead, there is a showdown with police right in front of her house, people flee, and nobody ever gets to drive. The real interest in the piece, however, comes from Sheila’s growing awareness of this world that has for as long as she can remember been a part of her life. Although always present, she never really asked any of the people in her house or in her family what it was all about and managed to avoid ever watching it happen.

In her reflection, Sheila was surprised by how eager those around her had been to share what they knew about drag racing and how excited her own father had been to have her watch and take an interest in what was going. Throughout her transcripts of interviews, she commented on her need to brush up her interviewing skills, always maintaining a dialogue with herself and with her readers. She chose to do many more interviews than the assignment required and got perspectives from those who race, those who are fans and those who are outsiders to the entire subculture.

Sheila was very quiet and often kept to herself in class, although she was always the one to participate in a thoughtful way when the rest of the class was unprepared or silent. She was reserved but very energetic in her own way, usually sitting to the side of the room in a zippered hoodie, smiling the smile of someone who always did her work and fully understood what was going on but didn’t let others know that. Because she had been rather quiet, the nature of her project and the language she presented in her spoken-word piece came as a surprise to her classmates, who were fascinated by the scenario and the action. Sheila’s piece was informed by a sensitivity to character and surroundings, to
identities and the positionality of herself and those otherwise involved in the subculture.

For her final presentation, Sheila performed snippets of the dialogue she overheard at the race, giving a spoken-word performance that was often brazen and confusing in its meaning. After her performance of the fast-paced language, she stopped to explain to her classmates what the words meant and where they had come into play in her observation of the evening of the drag race.

He got the break, you gotta put the money up

Gimme my money

Guaranteed break means he has to leave

He’s scared

I’m not taking no 500

Anyway, I’m a get my money

They getting money up right now

The fast-paced dialogue, the unfamiliar vocabulary and the nature of the activities interested Sheila and her classmates. The performance engaged her peers and made them consider how their classmate had come to be involved in this subculture and what that meant. Sheila felt she had found a way to bond with her father and brother yet keep her distance, just as she did in the classroom.

Considering my goals for the assignment, Sheila’s writing became increasingly critical and experimental, allowing her to express herself on multiple levels. She had an opportunity to explore a subculture she had otherwise been too timid to enter and created a stronger relationship to the members of the subculture as a result. The experience thus extended into her daily life and helped her produce insightful writing and analysis for her peers.

Kelly

Kelly was struggling with her first semester at a college, wondering where she really fit in. Her father was a graffiti artist and her mother and siblings also were visually artistic, so she felt pressure to show her own artistic talents. She shone in her writing ability and decided for her project to investigate her own neighborhood and the influence it had on her life. She struggled a long time to figure out what kind of project she wanted to do, feeling as almost all of the students do in the beginning, that she was not part of a subculture and didn’t know where to begin.

Through numerous conversations with Kelly, I came to understand her ambivalence about college and her difficulty in negotiating her situation. She was constantly trying to balance her family’s goals for her with figuring out where her own talents and ambitions were. When Kelly decided to focus on Brooklyn, she was able to deal simultaneously with her family and where she had been raised. It is not uncommon for students to do their projects on a neighborhood where they were raised or a childhood home or some aspect of family life. What made Kelly’s project interesting was the way she was able to engage her surroundings and through the process learn what her neighborhood meant to her on a
deeper level.

In her paper, Kelly looked through the lens of her family—people with strong artistic abilities and a desire to be free from the housing projects where they lived. Recounting episodes from her childhood, talking through her father and brother and mother’s perspective, Kelly was able to give a picture of an identity in flux—a person who had difficult interactions with drug dealers, was a high achiever in school, and struggled to earn family approval with academic achievements. She conducted interviews with her father, mother, and brother and explored her own memories of her neighborhood. She did observations in the areas surrounding where she grew up and drew on texts that reflected on the nature of home to develop her final project. She began her piece like a much older person reflecting on childhood experiences:

I always knew that one day I would be writing about Brooklyn, I just didn’t know how soon. I connect Brooklyn with who I am and who I am becoming like every hair on my head, it’s just natural. Even though I’ve lived in Brooklyn for all eighteen years of my life, I still feel like a part of me is indifferent. I think it’s really me searching for the true me.

In the piece, Kelly embodies her environment and analyzes her relationship to her surroundings by looking at Brooklyn as a home, something that cares for her and something that keeps calling her back, inviting but also disingenuous. In her reflection, she discusses how the project gave her the opportunity to reflect on her surroundings, how she felt about school and her family, how her identity was tied to her neighborhood and the way in which she had been raised. The interview with her mother and father gave her the opportunity to talk to them about their goals and background in Brooklyn and the way they felt about their relationship. Kelly’s reflective observation paints a picture of the connection she has with her surroundings as well as how she struggles to bridge the gaps.

I am a little hesitant to approach my mother to do the interview, especially while she’s watching the news, but I should get it done since it is due tomorrow. I tell her what I have to do and she gives me that look. It’s a special one that only mothers can do or just the women in my family, and I know I already have it, people told me. While I asked her the question, she looks up at the ceiling for answers, like clouds are floating with memories on them, only if it was that easy. Her gestures are flowing and have movement like a mob boss. It scares me a little bit. She smiles at me but she is really looking through me. She sees someone else with every question, I was a new person, and maybe I was her. She was free within me, the youth that just disappears after a while, without saying goodbye. I got to not only see another side of her, I felt like I was like her. Everything she was and everything she could have been. I wished that we could have talked more, but it was time to go to sleep.

My father and me just finished the beginning of the food for Thanksgiving, even though we don’t celebrate it. He is obviously tired and that usually happens when he has his drink. We’re watching television and I pop the question. He looks at me as if I am crazy. Well I believe that I am for helping him with cramps, so I think he can do this for me. He takes a sip of his drink and motions me with his eyes for me to begin. I start off with the questions and he grows sleepy. I was dual thinking at the time, I could clearly remember when he suggested that journalism wasn’t for me, and this interview proved that for him. I guess when he said that all of the questions sounded the same, it wasn’t good enough, I’m not sure if it ever is. We go through the questions and I know he loves to talk about his lifestyle and former adventures as a graffiti artist. I could see from the pictures that I found of the family how things really used to be and he misses that. He is frustrated by the change in the environment, but if anyone knows best he does, that things are bound to change. He looks at the television while he is talking to me and always has that know it all, catch me if you can smile on. Hey, what can you say that’s his signature, just like Brooklyn is for all of us.
For Kelly, the interviews with her parents both reaffirmed her assumptions about their attitudes toward the importance of her schoolwork and at the same time made her long to make more of a connection with them and understand how their worlds have changed. She uses her parents as representative of the fabric of Brooklyn, at once engaged in memory and reality, standoffish but reflective of herself and her life.

For her presentation, Kelly decided to do a spoken-word poem that explored her feelings for her home and her family while also showing her struggles to identify who she is and negotiate this with her environment. She performed a five-minute poem, which I have excerpted here.

Every word I write
The way I speak
The style I have
You’re a part of me
It originated, generated, and
Cultivated from you
You first rated and now it’s dated
Never hated—maybe a little
People played it
They’re all jaded
Soon you’ll be faded
Hopefully not so much
I hope you’ll remember me
And everything I aim to be
Who I once was
The transition you see
Cause like you we all change
It would be a shame

Kelly’s dialogue with Brooklyn, incorporating her memories, aspirations and hopes for the future, was touching for the whole class to hear. She was able to effectively translate the emotion and exploration of her written project into a piece that engaged and excited her audience. It was a thoughtful reflection of the changing nature of her subculture and her
changing place in it: while she would always maintain a connection to Brooklyn, she didn’t know if Brooklyn would always be there for her. Her nostalgia for a past recounted by her mother and her father reflects an uncertain connection for Kelly with Brooklyn in the future.

The goal of this project was not to come to any conclusions about her upbringing, but rather to explore a place that informed her life and her goals. Kelly’s relationships to Brooklyn and her family remain unresolved and thus realistic. She doesn’t try to force any conclusions on her project, but rather embraces it as an opportunity to explore, connect and share her subculture with her classroom community.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The critical writing in all of its varieties that emerged from students demonstrates that there is a good deal of potential in the mixing of qualitative inquiry and personal writing. Developing classroom methods that allowed students to understand their personal connection to what was happening in class, engage in meaningful writing, workshop and collaborate with peers, and create projects extending into the community and their lives beyond our classroom was the ultimate goal.

At the end of the semester, after grades had been submitted, I asked students to do an anonymous freewrite that reflected on their experiences in the class, including the topic, projects and texts. Most of them found the curriculum surprising for a writing class but were pleasantly surprised by how much their writing and critical thinking had improved. While some thought the subject matter had been somewhat repetitive, many felt it had helped them stay invested in all of the projects for the class. Overwhelmingly, students appreciated the opportunity to pursue personally meaningful subjects and share their insights with classmates.

Of course, not all student projects were successful and my instruction was not always clear. Especially when investigating personally important subcultures in the autoethnographic projects, students can become frustrated by a lack of progress. They may feel initially as if they are not part of any subculture, as I mentioned earlier in my analysis of Kelly’s project, and a constant conversation with peers and the instructor can guide those students who have a harder time choosing a topic. The opposite problem also occurs: students get so excited about a project that they want to go way above and beyond requirements with their research. It is important to remind students that it is only a one-semester assignment and that an adjustment in goals can be necessary and beneficial. As a class, we tried to plan for the inevitable, including unwilling or reticent interview subjects, cancellations, and restricted access to field sites. Teaching autoethnography requires a lot of adaptation on the part of the instructor and student and a willingness to adjust expectations based on unpredictable circumstances.

The benefit in all projects was that the students created large amounts of critical writing, and many student projects allowed an engagement with an aspect of a larger community and an opportunity to analyze their positionality in these communities. My suggestion is that we have an obligation to prepare our students by devising courses that can allow them to engage in personally relevant research and then share it with larger audiences. I believe students benefit from having the opportunity to think through the subcultures and communities they are part of, creating not only personal writing but personally invested writing and performance. Often the process leads them to ideas and feelings they have never fully analyzed before.

My favorite example of the personal performance projects leading to new insight is the case of Charles, a middle-aged...
man with a military background who sat among the otherwise traditional students in my Rhetoric 243 class at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the fall of 2006. He was clearly and rather vocally resistant to the work we were doing. He did not believe in sharing the self and thought the assignments were fluffy. He consistently showed he was simply not interested through both his body language and his participation. However, his attitude evolved when he was asked to engage in the autoethnographic inquiry project. Charles decided to talk about deer hunting, something everyone knew he liked because of the sweatshirts and t-shirts depicting deer that he regularly wore to class. Through his paper, he questioned why hunting was so important to him. To his surprise, as he shared with the class, it turned out that deer hunting was so important to him because it was the primary way he bonded with his father. He continued the tradition with his two little girls, enjoying the ritual of waiting to get deer in their sights but often going home without firing a shot. He explained described to the class that he found out deer hunting was a way for him to bond with his children as well, and he shared their pictures with me on his way out of class on the last day, his pride in his family obvious in his expression.

Charles is an example of a student who realized something about his own community by engaging in personal writing that gave him the ability to analyze his subculture and communicate the depth of the experience to his obviously moved peers and instructor. During the process of conducting qualitative research, interacting with his audience and sharing his subculture with classmates, his writing gained dimension and richness and became part of the process rather than simply a product of it. My point here is that despite difficulties and successes, I believe all students and instructors can find a way to benefit from this kind of work and evolve as writers and critical thinkers. While not all projects will be as intimate, this is not the point. Projects vary as much as individuals do, sometimes inviting new emotional insight and sometimes producing equally meaningful insight about the individual’s role in society. This kind of work can be engaged on many different personal levels and have varied meaning for each participant.