Autoethnographer Communities of Practice

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Abstract

Autoethnography is an emergent methodology that, notwithstanding its often being contested in traditional academia, is increasingly used as a qualitative strategy. With more researchers engaging in this work, a question can be raised about what supportive communities these researchers may have to encourage them to continue working and learning in this area, given its frequent peripheral status. The purpose of this research is to explore what role communities of practice (CoP) play within the lives of some who conduct autoethnographic research. Etienne Wenger, the pivotal figure in the CoP literature, claims that these communities are an integral part of our lives, and that participation in them has "broad implications for what it takes to understand and support learning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). Using Wenger's Community of Practice theoretical framework, three researchers who engage in autoethnographic research were identified and interviewed about the levels of support they received from their external research community. In the spirit of their researching their own perspectives and telling their own stories, narrative inquiry was used to present and analyze their perspectives. Findings from two of the interviewees show that internal motivation, personal involvement in their research, and just in time communities play a role in autoethnographer support, with their communities created as needed. The third interviewee experienced community of practice support and guidance, as per Wenger's learning model. Further research is suggested to explore how autoethnographers navigate through their own communities, and how the opportunities to collaborate and support one another in a networked environment may further develop their learning in this area.

Keywords

autoethnography, communities of practice, CoP, just in time communities, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Much of my academic and professional interest surrounds learning in personal transformation and expression. This fits with autoethnography, a research method that is "research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). As ethnography is a strategy of inquiry where a culture is studied, and insofar as a researcher can never fully remove her own experiences from the research process, then it follows that autoethnography consciously combines elements of ethnography and autobiography; the researcher actively situates the self within the culture being studied.

Autoethnography is increasingly used as a research method of inquiry, pushing the qualitative boundaries by focusing on a phenomenon in the life of the researcher as the central aspect of study. Published findings are intended as a cultural critique, appealing to readers to examine some notion of reality. There is evidence that autoethnography is contested—blurring fact and fiction, telling stories and pretending it is research, something confused with therapy, even the result of a self-absorbed author (Hemmingson, 2008; Maguire, 2006).

However, with dramatic changes occurring around the remodelling of authority, representation, and praxis, shaking up both the practice of research, as well as the role of the researcher herself (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003), the increasing emphasis on autoethnography is understandable. Ellis and Bochner, with the former being the most identifiable voice with this strategy, said that autoethnography is a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, where the personal (the researcher) is connected to the cultural (the people and places in the researcher's experiences) (2000).

I am interested in this form of research because it has educational implications for establishing, critically understanding, and developing one's identity. There seem to be elements of learning as personal transformation

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within it (Mezirow, 2000), and as an educational researcher and practitioner, I seek to understand my experiences as tools and lessons for learners who often work and research together from a distance.

Research Problem

I need a community of researchers to support, challenge, and otherwise share my work. I am not productive or creative when working completely alone, outside this support structure. As autoethnographic elements are an increasing theme in my work, and while I feel research community support, I began to wonder how others navigate this contentious strategy of inquiry, and if they, too, rely on their own communities of practice. With the dispersion of proponents of this research throughout various departments, specializations, and fields, it is not clear how or if there is engagement and support of (dispersed) communities of practice around those who engage in autoethnography. How else would it spread and continue to develop? We do not know whether or how supportive or networked communities of practice exist in the lives of autoethnographic researchers.

Significance

This research is significant for several reasons. There is limited research that seeks to study those who conduct research using autoethnography. We do not know much about what sustains those who increasingly choose to use this disputed methodology. Finally, this is a new opportunity to test Wenger's community if practice framework within academia, especially involving a network of researchers and learners.

Theoretical Framework

I began with a study of Wenger's foundational works in the area of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1999). Wenger defines CoP as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, n.d.). I am encouraged to explore autoethnographic methodology through linking my research interests in learner empowerment and personal transformation (Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 2003; Mezirow, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987) with the postmodern notion that a unified grand narrative for knowing the world does not exist (Lyotard, 1984); autoethnography is not for everyone.

Review of the Literature

It goes beyond the scope of this work to defend the use or justify the benefits of autoethnography. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that its use continues to increase, even over the objections of its detractors. For example, there were 54 references to autoethnography in the Program for the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in 2005, more than doubling to 124 references for the same term in the 2009 Program ("Fifth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Program," 2009; First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Program," 2005). Given this growth, we still know little about those who engage in autoethnography.

Reed-Danahay (1997) was one of the early developers of this strategy, using narrative inquiry and turning it in on itself and on the various cultures surrounding the researcher. Carolyn Ellis's *The Ethnographic I* has become the pivotal work that details, explores, explains, and provides examples of what autoethnography is and some of the extents into which it can be explored (2004). Stacy Holman Jones, in the third edition of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, includes issues of telling vs. showing, and the construction of the self and how its performative element is about translating an experience to text and then text to experience (2005). Heewon Chang focuses on autoethnography as grounded within anthropological perspectives of people in community, with efforts to provide details and guidance for researchers who seek to use this method. In this process, autoethnography is a strategy to help people gain an understanding of themselves and of others (2008).

The concept of the Community (or communities) of Practice is linked with the work of Etienne Wenger. Originally developed with Jean Lave (Lave & Wenger, 1991), it has since developed primarily through Wenger (Wenger, 1998, 1999, n.d.; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Communities of practice are defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, n.d.). Wenger links understanding the phenomenon of the community of practice with increasing performance, as it was developed to explain how apprentices enter the communities where they learn the knowledge and skills to fully practice and participate in the profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This social theory of learning has implications for how we engage in various forms of adult education (Kimble, Hildreth, & Bourdon, 2008a, 2008b) and in the role of technology in developing and

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supporting communities (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). The influence of communities of practice on networked learning is beginning to be explored (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005; Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006).

While there is an increasing presence of autoethnography within the literature, there is little to suggest that autoethnographer communities of practice have been explored. Furthermore, there is little in the literature to suggest that autoethnographers, those who engage in autoethnographic research, have been studied—either alone or within their communities of practice. While the research within this tradition is expanding, most comes from researchers who use the method to conduct their work, rather than focusing on the population who engage in it. This gap in the literature should be studied as this strategy of inquiry is increasingly being utilized.

Purpose

Wenger claims that communities of practice are an integral part of our lives, and that participation in them has "broad implications for what it takes to understand and support learning" (1998, p. 7). The purpose of this research is to explore the role CoPs play within the lives of those who conduct autoethnographic research.

Research Design

Creswell states a research design is comprised of a philosophical worldview, a strategy of inquiry, and a research method (Creswell, 2009). I approach this from a critical / constructivist epistemological paradigm, believing that a virtual reality shaped by power and historical forces influence co-constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The qualitative strategy of inquiry will be narrative inquiry, researching the telling of stories about experiences (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Riessman, 2008). The research method will be semi-structured, narrative interview (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Methodology

A request for participants was sent during the summer of 2009 to two networked learning discussion groups identified to have readers who engage in autoethnography ("Autoethnography Listerv," 2009; QUALRS-L: Qualitative Research for the Human Sciences,"). Potential participants were requested to have completed and published at least one autoethnographic work, with publishing broadly understood to mean publicly presented to others (i.e., conference, journal, online, submitted for a degree program, etc.). Two interviewees were intended, though it expanded to three when all three expressed nearly simultaneous and immediate interest in this research. The three were coincidently female, from three different continents. A single interview each was conducted over the phone. Formal ethical approval for this study was granted. Email consent to participate in the research was provided, with a confirming oral consent as well. Participants were assured of anonymity, with pseudonyms provided and identifying information removed.

Due to the exploratory and narrative nature of this research, there were two open-ended, semi-structured interview questions to begin and frame the discussion, with a hope that the questions would lead to further questions and a discussion that would produce a narrative: 1) What support or encouragement do you (or did you) have when you engage(d) in your research? 2) Do you find yourself a member of any identifiable community (of practice) that plays a role with your autoethnographic research?

The interviews were recorded and self-transcribed, with references removed (Bird, 2005; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Lapadat, 2000; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). The completed transcriptions were sent to the interviewees for validation as a component of reliability (Creswell, 2009; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Besides email communication with the participants and the cell phone used for the interviews themselves, all other aspects of the research remained secure on a password-protected computer.

Narrative inquiry involves recording the stories told, based on an assumption that "people live 'storied' lives and that telling and retelling one's story helps one understand and create a sense of self" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 115). It seemed fitting that autoethnographers, who focus on telling and interpreting their own stories within the context of their experiences and cultures, should themselves be studied from the perspective of their own shared narratives. Clandinin and Connelly explain that this strategy of inquiry acknowledges that "life—as we come to it and as it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (2000, p. 17). Using only the interviews for the narrative texts, a thematic analysis was completed following the processes

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elaborated upon by Riessman, focusing on "'what' is said, rather than 'how,' 'to whom,' or 'for what purposes'" (2008, p. 53). This process occurred by reading and re-reading the transcription results numerous times, focusing on the two research questions and the research problem being studied. Underlying assumptions in each account were identified and named, with particular language selected to illustrate general patterns. The words of the participants were interspersed with our own "interpretation, theoretical formulation, and references to prior theory" (Riessman, 2008, p. 57). Riessman elaborates on the practical elements of this method, where the "'messy' spoken language is transformed to make it easily readable;" the emphasis is on the events of the story as told from the investigator's perspective while maintaining the narratives of the participants (2008, p. 58).

Trustworthiness

Various factors support research trustworthiness, as narrative inquiry does not have a clear, single approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riessman, 2008). Since I have previously engaged in autoethnography, this research into a shared methodology helped make the interviewees comfortable with me as a colleague trying to learn more and move the framework along. Credibility was promoted through sending the complete transcripts for member checking for data trustworthiness. Transferability was promoted through thick descriptions of the findings, presented here in as much detail as space permits, enough to "provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on part of potential appliers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Coherence, persuasion, and presentation are promoted as the narrative analysis holds together, without gaps and inconsistencies, with the final presentation intended to be persuasive for the reader (Riessman, 2008).

Presentation and Analysis

The three interviewees conducted for this study are individually presented, with the participants' words indented and interwoven with an analysis explicating the their words and the research purpose (Riessman, 2008).

Jennifer

The first person I spoke with was Jennifer, who used autoethnography in her recent doctoral dissertation. I wondered what about how the interview request for participants moved her to reply to the email:

> Probably because I work quite alone. . . . I am outside an academic situation, and therefore it is
> hard to find the support anyway! I thought if you were interested in that side of it . . . .

Wonderful; an opportunity to engage in some reflection about the topic! Seems that there may not be a sense of community here, so to delve further into trying to learn about support or community while engaged in the thesis:

> I did see my supervisor once a month . . . part of the reason for the first year [of studies] is to go to
> these methods courses . . . to get to know a group, to stay in contact with them, through time . . .
> so they support each other though they are not doing similar things at all.

So, basic support by being a member of a cohort. Common experience. Wonder where the autoethnography fits in? Perhaps the cohort?

> I thought some of the theorists [in my field] were just missing the point . . . I was in the middle . . .
> of a controversy. That was a bit of autoethnography for me. I was having trouble getting a
> diagnosis because of attitudes and beliefs . . . I cannot get an answer from anyone . . . incredible.

Ah, the personal need. Some internal, unanswered, personal need seems to want to come out, to be expressed, explored, and voiced. This is the outlet that led to autoethnographic research. Similar to what attracted me, too.

> The suggestion was that I carry on with doing biographical interviews with people who had [a
> "taboo" condition; omitted for anonymity], which is what I was looking at . . . It is not sexy, . . .
> so let's face it, nobody wants to deal with disabled people. I was really more interested in the
> childhood stories. It was ignored they ever had [this condition], or they had forgotten they had it.
> It was taboo to ever mention it. That is what drew me to the whole subject.

Isolation, secrets, shame, suppression, repression. Jennifer's research faced the taboos in the culture, those which nobody wanted to explore. Wonder how she felt supported with such a weighty charge?

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I could talk to my fellow PhD students; it wasn't taboo to them. I received limited support from my supervisor, who suggested I put my autoethnography into an appendix . . . .

She was somehow personally involved; this was not just a study of the others; she was one of them. Limited support from a community that really understood the topic or method, how to engage in autoethnography?

I knew that there were these secret stories and hidden things, because I read quite a few autobiographies as well before I even started. Some of them, the ones written more recently, are quite revealing. But, I didn't know anything much was wrong with me. I also had this secret childhood, not knowing quite what was going on. I suppose I wanted to explore it.

There was Jennifer's want, or need, to use autoethnography. She found her own story through her work with others. Was her community something larger than just people around her? Was it in possibly in those who were studied, while trying to tell their stories?

I was interested in why my family might have kept the same secret. I think autoethnography kind of very often starts because you are a person who has experienced the same things as the people you are interviewing, which some researchers admit to, and other researchers don't admit to . . . that you've got the same [experience] as the people you are interviewing. Some people don't want to admit to that; they just want to be the objective researcher . . . In my case, a lot of people said that they would not have told the story they told to someone who hadn't experienced something similar. I felt I am in the same boat as them.

Jennifer's path to autoethnography was her learning about herself through studying others. This was internally driven and supported, rather than the result of being surrounded by a community of practice. Her supportive community was, ironically, those she studied. This is an unexpected twist on learning about oneself.

Nellie

Nellie was the second person interviewed. She also had an autoethnographic focus in her recent doctoral dissertation. Why did she offer to work with me on this research?

Just the autoethnography. You specifically asked for people who have used autoethnography, and [I] wanted to talk about it. I love talking about it!

Nellie certainly seems to love autoethnography. Clear, to the point, and uncompromising. When asking her why:

It's exciting! It's a very satisfying way to do research, and I loved doing my PhD, and I'm teaching it now, and talking to other people about, so it's a part of my everyday life.

With such focused energy around it, certainly she must have had the support of a community of practice?

Not really. My PhD was done working on my own, without any coursework, so I really did not have any access to teachers who did it. My supervisor always supported me to keep going my own way . . . she would say, "So, where did you get your evidence for this? How are you making this up? I don't think you even have a valid methodology here. You need to go back to your theory again." She forced me to be very rigorous. In a way, her challenges were supportive.

Working alone without a supportive community around the method. Wonder how she learned how to do this?

I read a lot. Carolyn Ellis almost entirely. I managed to get over to the Qualitative Inquiry Congress once. When it came to the analysis, I actually had to make it up from the beginning, because I could not find anything that actually made sense. The research that I did was actually called collective autoethnography. I started with my own story. From there, I went out and I asked others to tell me their stories . . . it was always a process of them providing me with their own autoethnographic stories, and then I pulled them all together. But once you ask people to open up with something like that, they stay in touch. So, I was getting emails and phone calls. "How are

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you going?" I can't wait to see it finished." "When are you going to publish things?' "Can you send me what you are doing?" They were my support group to finish with my research.

So, there was a community, though it existed in the very population being studied (yet again), rather than a community within higher education. Perhaps there is a pattern developing here, where researchers are supported by those who are the subjects of the studies? Now that Nellie is a professor, I wonder how she uses it today?

When I was studying, I was on a planet of one at that point. Now, I am still pretty much here by myself! It is being picked up a little bit more, and certainly people are very interested in it when I talk about it. I still don't have that community. When I am writing about the methodology, the thing that probably connected it the most for me is about my [indigenous] heritage of morality, storytelling, metaphor, and spiritual belief, which can be incorporated into autoethnography, and not into most other methodologies.

So, still working alone, though with an acknowledgement that her support comes from an alternative perspective to the Western one where autoethnography is the researcher and the experience. Nellie's research is around similar experiences to her own, so her participants share a supportive bond with her through their commonality. Once again, the constant external community for the pure research itself is not present.

If anything that comes out of this [research] that turns into some sort of global network of autoethnographers, great! We need, when we have students coming through, to connect them.

Though working alone with her participants, Nellie seems to yearn for more formal external support. Perhaps Wenger's community framework may not fit, needing to expand to involve non-peers? Come to think of it, some of the researchers we have researched before have been very supportive during and after the projects!

Carol

The third participant interviewed was Carol, a professional working in higher education who is presently finishing a graduate degree. She recently presented some of her autoethnographic work at a qualitative conference. I wondered why she replied so enthusiastically to my email?

You may or may not remember that I initially found your [web]site actually by just doing a search for information about Yvonna Lincoln at the QI2009 Conference. I have just been lurking, reading, and when you put out that call, I thought, if I could offer anything, then happy to do so.

Small world! Amazing how community develops. I wonder what engaged her to try autoethnography?

Three years ago . . . my research methodology professor assigned some readings. I responded in a way that just felt very normal for me, and it turned out that was in autoethnographic way. I related my reading to my own life. My professor encouraged me to continue finding more about [autoethnography] . . . he and his wife were supportive.

Finally, some external academic community support! So, you received some formal support?

Absolutely. [The professor] introduced me to these various different [autoethnographic] researchers and this whole world that I didn't know anything about. I don't think that I would have known that this is a legitimate form without the support.

It seems that Carol has found an extended community of practice around autoethnographic inquiry. This, finally, seems to support Wenger's model.

I just wanted to go to QI2009 [the conference] and absorb it. Qualitative research is just so much more interesting and real; I can relate to it.

This seems the community of practice engagement. So, what are you doing with this interest now?

I have one class left for my master's, and I just started teaching full-time in the Fall . . . I want to try some of my ideas with my classes. I am actually mentoring other people at school to use this.

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Seems that Carol did receive positive support and reinforcement from a small community, beginning with a single professor, linking her then with a larger community. That linkage appears to have been enough to continue to spread engagement, within a dispersed community of practice enabling support, nurture, and even learning.

Findings, Implications, and Next Steps

What was learned about communities of practice for autoethnographers? Jennifer found informal support from those she interviewed, engaged primarily by her own personal involvement in experiences similar to her interviewees. Nellie was also supported from those she interviewed, propelled from her own internal passion in the subject. Neither had formal organizational, academic, or collegial support in anything that resembles a traditional community of practice. Their communities were created via their research, in a just-in-time manner as needed, somewhat at odds with those communities per Wenger's model. They were supported from an internal drive nourished from their involvement in their work and those they met along the way. Carol's experience was similar, in that she began doing something that somehow felt right, though it was different in that she received formal community support, initially in the person of her professor who initiated her to a wider network. This entrance and nourishment within this group seems consistent with Wenger's framework. Jennifer and Nellie both struggled with cultural pressures against their work, while Carol engaged in a supportive and nurturing culture. All three are firmly committed to autoethnographic methodology. While implications for autoethnographer communities of practice may hold possibilities for social learning, traditional communities of practice frameworks (domain, community, and practice) were not necessarily critical for these participants. This may be significant, as it suggests that something as contentious as autoethnography does not require a formal community of practice to develop—there may be something else. Perhaps reframing Wenger's model for the researchers to reposition the community inside their inquiry as needed, rather than having it exist apart and external? Carol's experience supports what was expected, though even she indicated she was doing autoethnography without naming it. Autoethnography seems more elusive and involved than initially supposed.

Next steps may be to explore what support is helpful for those new to the methodology and where it comes from, especially as all three participants found my work in a networked learning context. Connecting dispersed and isolated autoethnographers to one another within a virtual community of practice may enhance their learning and provide a new venue for studying the socially-connected personal learning element that is sometimes wanting in networked learning research. I even find my own understanding of being a networked learner developing when considering the complexities of just-in-time communities, created as needed and developing online as the result of various research and practice-oriented projects. Finally, considering the importance of the individual in the research, I wonder how Mezirow's Transformative Learning framework may further personalize this experience and offer additional insights with the increasing opportunities for collaborative and cooperative learning through the Internet (2000).

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