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The critical autobiography and the professional doctorate

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These research findings emerged from a year-long series of workshops for professional doctorate candidates at Middlesex University. The workshops used autobiographies, biographies, novels, journalism, poetry and essays from the 18th to the 21st century to stimulate discussion and learning in relation to each candidate's style, tastes and context support the development of writing skills appropriate to doctoral practice knowledge. Outcomes included bridging academic, reflective and professional writing; deepening critical thinking and expression and understanding and practising critical autobiography – all of which are core components of professional/practitioner based doctorates.

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Introduction

The professional doctorate is a doctoral pathway[i] that focuses on theorising and conceptualising practice and change agency in the practitioner's context. It has key characteristics: it puts the researcher at the centre of the work; takes a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge; aims to impact both practice and knowledge and to provide tangible outcomes for the benefit of stakeholders.

Due to the complex nature of work environments and the variety of possible beneficiaries of the research findings, the research approaches are usually in the mixed methods arena or are evolving methodologies. In qualitative approaches, an indicator of reliability is the transparency of the researcher and their ability to research themselves as well as the field or sector on which they aim to have an impact. Other indicators of professional doctoral level research are the depth of criticality in research areas which are inter, multi and transdisciplinary; articulation and conceptualisation of complex practices and expertise and the positioning of the practice in wider knowledge arenas including the academic arena.

It was the challenges of facilitating mastery of placing self at the centre of the writing; articulation of practice and expertise and developing critical depth that motivated us to combine our academic knowledge areas[ii] with our expertise in professional studies and design and deliver a series of workshops.

In 2012 we designed four themed workshops.[iii] Reading materials and activities were prepared in advance and a web presence set up for interaction with and between participants. We ensured a mixture of literature including that chosen by participants as favourites and pet hates, and literature that they were most unlikely to access. We defined 'literature' as various publications (journals, books, magazines) from fiction to non-fiction covering a range of genres.

It soon became apparent that delving into literature produced rich depths of self knowledge as likes and dislikes were explored. A different kind of questioning emerged as participants dialogued with the literature. This began to lead to confidence in challenging not only their own ontological and epistemological stance but those of others perceived by the non academics as keyholders to some epistemic treasury more sacred than accessible. In a sense the workshops succeeded in making barriers visible and supplying the means to challenge and gain a mastery over them. Although the workshops were intended to develop a better writing style and capacity to critically engage with the literature genres to develop skills in translating ideas and concepts, it became increasingly evident to us that participants were reading their own experiences into the texts at some depth.

In this paper we explore how this emerged and why and suggest how it can be positioned in a critical autobiographical frame and become an important tool in developing level 8[iv] criticality not only in the professional doctoral context but in non academic sectors. We hope that our perceptions and observations will also contribute to (i) thinking of critical autobiography as a form of research that encompasses autoethnography[v] which is becoming increasingly used in organisations but with varying degrees of success and needs further development (ii) the discussion of the relevance of identity to professional learning as participants drew on their cultural store of conceptual frames that serve to contribute to their individual formation of self.

What lies beneath

As Michael Ryan (1976:34) points out in his review of Jeffrey Mehlman's study of autobiography, if self-knowledge were ever possible, there would be `an incredible self-destruction, a recognition that the self's

sovereign interiority is split and invaded by exteriority; that its illusory homogeneity is, in fact heterogeneous. But this very heterogeneity prevents complete self-knowledge'.

In other words, like Narcissus not being able to see himself uncritically, that is to see self in relation to others resulting in unknowingness in life, wasted his life and that of others represented by Echo. Autobiography can fall under the spell of Narcissus and therefore the `critic of autobiography' is necessary (34).  Perhaps autobiography is motivated by a `narcissistic dream of self-presence' (35). Perhaps it is also `necessarily fictive' (36), `a discourse containing the discursive subject which constitutes the topic of discussion' (Blanchard, 1982:100), or simply a form that can hardly be expected to contain the complexity of a life. The best definition might be Pascal's (1960:54) conviction that it is a form which offers its readers `a complex set of interpretative problems'.

Autobiographers do not share the same principles or value set but there appears to be a common motive `to carve public monuments out of their private lives' (Howarth, 1974: 369). In the context of critiquing one's own practice with a view to making significant change to one's profession, organisation or community of practice, the soul of the professional doctorate begins in the practitioner's critiqued story of their working life. In fact, one type of autobiography – the oratorical autobiography – takes as its theme vocation, how work guides one's life and becomes the story of one's life.

However autobiography is defined, it is an ineluctable fact that constructing one's story concerns language, not least the use of the first person and an I - we construct that is often uncritical, lacking in 'other' awareness and set in contexts that are often more background than critically engaged with as a major influence.such as the lives of others. But the lives of others are usually not the point of the autobiography unless they are angels or demons to be praised or damned by the self focused view of the author. The psychoanalyst is always interested in how notions of self are constructed and in the `latent dynamics of the text' (Ryan, 1976: 40), what the author did not intend, the unconscious dimension of the work, or a certain ignorance concerning one's own text. In short, the traditional autobiography is often a case of writing the obituary you would like to be written about you rather than grappling with the obituary that will be written about you and using that to transform your thinking, your practices and your life.

This paper focuses on the 'unpremeditated' use of autobiography to improve criticality and academic writing because although we encourage doctoral candidates to recount their `stories' as they relate to their workplaces, past and present, and what has informed their values and decision making processes, we are not looking for their stories to be histories. A *history* is a story that is experienced, recounted and condensed usually chronologically. Instead the autobiography functions as *language*. It allows the writer:

`to project human life, complete with its epistemological processes, into a mental space whose primary feature is that it includes representation of the subject slowly going through all the steps, meticulously surveying the various planes which made this mental space possible' (Blanchard, 1982:114).

Participants examined the writing of others and in doing that 'critical' autobiography began to emerge.

The project

We shared the delivery and the facilitation of the groups. Maguire focused on examining criticality, introducing the fundamentals of critical thinking, dialoguing with knowledge and challenging the selection of likes and dislikes based on uncritiqued assumptions or prejudices thereby taking responsibility for limiting one's own access to knowledge. Eastman focused on literature, introducing the participants to convincing and persuasive prose to see how points of view were handled, pieces framed and organised, what metaphors and images were employed and the use or not of `evidence' to support their conclusions. There was, however, a degree of overlap. Participants reported that, as facilitators, with different professional backgrounds we modelled the possibilities of *transdisciplinarity in action, the complementarity of otherness, the celebration of difference.* The participants themselves were from a range of ethnic and professional backgrounds which enriched the discussions.

In terms of an originating idea for the workshops, Eastman had a hypothesis that by investigating the structure and function of language as well as writers' narrative styles and what they do linguistically, students could be made more aware of the subtleties and nuances of the English language. She had run a number of specialist workshops within work-based learning/professional practice programmes because it seemed self-evident that a merger could be effected between literature and professional studies. One of her first series of workshops encouraged her students to look at the works of great essayists (Addison, Pope, Woolf, Eliot, Bacon): she was convinced that exploring the knowledge gleaned by reading great writers would enhance the students' learning (Eastman, 2013).

The more she worked with students in this way, the more she realised that the study of certain essayists and novelists could show students what makes good writing and help them to become more energised by the challenges of argument, contradictions and complexity (Eastman, 2014).

For these specific workshops on the critical autobiography and the professional doctorate, she gathered a range of excerpts from biography, journalism and poetry, in particular essays from Barbara Ehrenreich, George Orwell and poetry from Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, in order to examine prose styles and language. She wanted the students to observe how writers articulated their own "stories" and to get them to rigorously dissect what the writers were doing in order to help them come to terms with writing their own "stories" as well as to express themselves more creatively and boldly and to strengthen their own writing imaginatively.

1. ***The critic in us all: the dark arts of persuasion and boringness - criticality and the fundamentals of critical thinking***

Probing the notion of critical thinking was done through examining the dynamics of constructing convincing and persuasive prose with learning which came out of the experiential parts being linked back to their doctoral work. Participants had been asked to bring in examples of writing they liked and disliked and to share their views in pairs.

 Participants agreed that critical thinking was the fundamental building block in higher education, particularly at doctoral level, but that it was not solely a rational, mechanical activity. Reflection, including emotional responses, was central to critical thinking in adult life. In particular, the ability to imagine alternatives to one's current ways of thinking and living, is one that often entails a deliberate break with rational modes of thought in order to prompt leaps in creativity. This reflection, as Boud and Walker (cited in Boud, Cohen & Walker, 2009:82) explain is `a useful instrument for recognising (the barriers) which come from our personal story and those which come from the social, cultural context in which we have developed.' Critical thinking or critical reflection should therefore be the basis of autobiography. The more critical the doctoral candidate is, the better he or she is able to tell his or her story. However, what had challenged us was how often they wrote descriptively, concentrating on problem solving and ways of doing or not doing rather than on ways of being in the world which informs ways of doing.

The idea of critical autobiography as a model in which the value of the individual can be appreciated, in which the mystery of what it means to be human is revered, in which the possibilities of identity exploration are rich and transformative, is one which surfaced as early as the first half of this first seminar.

When discussing the writers whom the participants admired or did not admire, they began to reveal themselves and a notion of the self as defined by its relationship to others. One participant read out an excerpt from the `Four-Gated City' by Doris Lessing. He praised its vocabulary from a *vanished time* describing the writing as *evocative*, *poetic* and having a depth of narrative that evoked 1950s London perfectly, *a London he could relate to* and the narrator, *a woman he could relate to*. Another discussed the *beauty of the Qu'ran*, its *lyricism* drawing him into the possibilities of beauty in everyday life forming the *cornerstone of his approach to leaning*. Another offered his admiration of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and later posted this on our blog: *The book reminds me of the deceits we frequently find in modern political systems, particularly man's inhumanity to man.*

Each participant seemed more eager to link his or her preferred literary choice to a life experience rather than become involved in the intricacies of the work itself. They were trying to connect to the character and in doing that they were connecting to themselves, understanding themselves. As Bruns (1992:252) points out, `…basic to hermeneutics both ancient and modern is the idea that there is no understanding at a distance; one must always work out some internal connection with what one seeks to understand.'

Such dialoguing produced admissions of struggling with their own writing, harbouring anxious attitudes towards writing at this academic level. As Russo (2005:195) explains, `Since we put together our lives as narratives, with intentions, a causal and temporal order, a setting, we tend to make narratives of others too, and study history and even fiction for similar selves.'

By the end of this first session, criticality had deepened significantly. The questions participants were asking of each other and of the works had become qualitatively different over the four hours influencing how they might use the discussions to enhance their own academic writing. Below are examples of the discussions.

Boredom

 By challenging one's assumptions and 'narcissistic' position that excludes dialogue with the views of others, others were drawn in, finding resonances, being persuaded, not being bored. Discussions deconstructed the notion of boredom. 'Boredom' was first used in English literature by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House* (1852). The most potent definition in the context of the articulation and communication of knowledge was writing that keeps the reader out, which kills the energy of the reader making an internal connection impossible. In this sense the writer is committing murder. Returning to the story of Narcissus it was Echo who was slowly and painfully killed off by Narcissus' failure to acknowledge her existence though she tried repeatedly to connect to him.

Assumptions

The difference between 'not wanting to know' or read something because of personal and cultural prejudice and remaining in a state of 'not knowing' because of it. There was fear around exposure to what they did not want to know– a theme which came up later in Workshop 3 and which will be discussed more fully then.

Participants were beginning to accept responsibility for not accessing knowledge; their writing styles being on the whole instrumental, following formats which keep themselves and others out of the frame and having *hierarchical reverence* for the *big guns* of literature and knowledge. Fear of exploring them critically was now diminishing.

2. ***Whose voice is it anyway and why is nobody listening? - finding your voice as a writer***

 We looked at the authentic voice as being sometimes elusive as we try to fit into criteria of what we think is expected of us; as existing when the internal and external self are congruent. This raised issues about the subjective voice in research. The grammatical style of traditional research is the passive voice to underpin objectivity and reliability but it often fails to reveal the 'metissage', the complexity that exists between islands of knowledge, in social constructs, in the I - we tensions, in the influences on motivations and actions, power dynamics, the experience of the lived rather than the observed world. In practitioner research, involving the subjective - objective dialogue, the first person captures the metissage. As the subjective voice in professional contexts is not usually an acceptable indicator of reliability, it is challenging to encourage our doctoral candidates to develop the subjective - objective dialogue. It emerged from our participants that it was not only that the passive was indicative of reliability but that they used it to *hide behind*, *to keep subjective opinions silent* even if these had been critically informed by years of professional experience. What then might be the 'subjective' voice of each individual with its own hallmark be? In every writing situation the writer uses a particular voice which indicates the relationship she intends to establish between herself and her readers.

> A writer's voice depends on three things: his knowledge of himself, his awareness of the character of his audience, his understanding of the matter he wishes to discuss. Unless he knows his subject, he

will not be able to strike a clear attitude toward it; unless he knows his audience, he will not be able to choose means of persuasion likely to be effective with it; unless he knows himself, he will not understand his purposes clearly enough to appreciate which voice or voices he can honestly assume in making his appeal (Martin and Ohmann, 1963: 138).

Our contention is that the passive voice can render indistinct, less powerful and even evasive such knowledge and awareness, such a clear attitude, such an appreciation of subject and audience. We went through a number of exercises demonstrating the impact of using the more direct and rigorous active voice eg: `The mouse was eaten by the cat.'- `The cat ate the mouse.'

However, this demonstration felt like a "lesson" – pedagogically prescriptive and flat. It was not until we turned to `voice' in poetry that the participants engaged. They read Robert Frost's `Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening' and identified with the bold narrative style of an author who refuses to efface his presence in the literary work. Some of the comments included an admiration for Frost's sense of concision, his directness, his exact word choice. One participant remarked on the poem's *autobiographical lucidity*. Participants repeatedly expressed the desire to find the voice to relate their narrative construction without it being boring, narcissistic and unreliable:

I saw [the workshops] as a chance to... grapple with what we were supposed to be doing and most importantly, find out what `voice' I needed to have for my doctorate

[there is] a trusting atmosphere where we can express ideas and learn how to express ourselves and find our voices without feeling stupid

my main problem is that I don't like to commit to paper until I feel confident about what I am saying

My aim has always been to find my original voice because I know it's like no one else's.

It became increasingly apparent that this elusive `voice' was the tool by which the participants could impart their knowledge and values. Although it was helpful for the participants to explore how points of view are handled, how pieces of writing are framed and organised and how writers use metaphors and images to strengthen their prose, participants appeared to be searching for the confidence to write in their own voices where 'own' appeared to have a different identity than 'own' in the context of their professional lives.

3. *What do you mean it's not original? cultural paradigms and power dynamics in concepts and language*

We came to realise from the discussions that the participants were uncertain about this concept of originality in terms of a piece of research and originality in terms of the communication of the research journey and the interpretation of the observations and data collected. We had linked the originality to the cultural and power dynamics to explore what is considered original and hence unique and what is considered distinctive and a new synthesis which can be used by others if they allow themselves to be open to it.

We had asked participants to carry out two activities prior to the workshop. The first was to read `The Years of Magical Thinking' chapter from Barbara Ehrenreich's *Smile or Die*: *How Positive Thinking Fooled America*. The chapter serves as a critique of the multi-billion dollar positive-thinking industry but is also an autobiographical account of the author's diagnosis of breast cancer, her feelings of impotence and rage, and her subsequent investigation into motivational conferences resulting in an acerbic, balanced and sage diagnosis of an America beset by the seductive assumption that one only has to desire something to make it happen. We were less interested in whether the participants agreed with Ehrenreich's polemic views on complacency and brainwashing and more in whether the participants could comment on her `voice'. The participants concluded that a major strength of her writing is her ability to merge her facts with her autobiography. In personalising her argument, she makes it more *immediate*, *potent* and *urgent*. Her response to her concerns – whether economic, political or social – are filtered through a heightened emotional awareness which is coloured by her history, memory and autobiography.

The participants commented on Ehrenreich's *ability to interpret a subject*, analyse and discuss it with *precision, care and lucidity* while *amplifying her questioning prose with the personal, with the self, with an expression of her own identity.* They did not doubt the reliability of her evidence or her authenticity. They did not feel manipulated. From the discussions, the participants came to understand that originality can reside in a thing, an artefact, but also in a person and their way of seeing, searching, interpreting and communicating.

What then emerges as a piece of research into a particular area of the professional setting becomes distinctive, a new synthesis, an existing model applied to a new situation, in a new way fundamentally informed by the critical engagement the researcher has with their own lived experience and its relationship to the environment and the people with whom he/she interacts. Ehrenreich's approach had helped the reader to find the internal connection to what she was saying and her critical view of herself provided the conditions of reliability about her observations about the environment. She also modelled that a good observer will find things they never expected to if they have the courage to challenge their own cultural assumptions and their own authority figures.

The second part of this workshop was in relation to these power dynamics and cultural influences, a way to look at what blocks our route to originality and distinctiveness that can have a wider audience. These are usually around prejudice carried through cultures and Cultures. We had put four poems on the website for participants to read in advance without knowing the authors. They were all about identity and belonging but none of the poets had identified the details of who they were and what cultures they were talking about. The discussions were open and frank about what participants had been able to relate to and what they had not. There was talk about being able to relate to one poem because it was *obviously by a man who had known battles*, for another it was being able *to relate to the exile of the Jewish people* so perhaps it had been written by a Jewish exile, and for everyone there was the ability to relate to the anguish of physical separation from one's culture and of separation from what has made you feel safe for most of your life. The revelation of who the poets were caused genuine surprise, for example the man was in fact a woman, the Jewish exile a Palestinian. It then emerged that the exercise had helped them to tolerate separation from prejudices so that the universals could come into the foreground and that criticality was also about tolerating where you have been mistaken and having the courage to explore ideas and visions from which you have been separated by culture and by perceived knowledge authorities.

In addition to engendering a critical appraisal of self and others and of the power of language and cultural paradigms, it was our belief that confidence was central to all writing and self-expression. A command of structure, language and material allows the writer to be bold. Above all, the goal of writing is to `succeed with human readers' (Elbow, 2011:174). Readers are too diverse to agree to the same standards of quality, therefore the ability to write well is predicated on that fragile and elusive ingredient called confidence. Our premise was that confidence makes a piece of writing assertive, searching and powerful and could be developed by practising autobiography and constructing personal narratives.

In her exploration of working class autobiography and gender, Regenia Gagnier argues that narratives of the self are extremely significant in the discourse of human identity. The following criteria from her autobiographical canon, are those we emphasised in the workshops.; `a faith in writing as a tool of self-expression; an attempt to make sense of life as a narrative progressing in time (...) and a belief in personal creativity, autonomy, and freedom for the future' (cited in Bell & Yalom 1990:100).

To a certain extent, we were unconsciously promoting an autobiographical discourse when we set out to help doctoral candidates become more effective writers.

4. *I speak English therefore I can write it – the many Englishes – freeing myself in the act of writing* [vi]

There was discussion about: what is allowed and not allowed in academic writing protocols such as contracted verbs and using dialect and computer speak; being authentic if you do not write how you speak; the different conventions for (i) those for whom English is not a first language and the possibility of

translation or over-formalisation (ii) for native English speakers who might slip into less formal English and about cultural differences on reliability if the writing does not follow formal academic protocols.

The discussion progressed to writing for different audiences. The professional doctorate requires the use of the first person but encourages reports for different audiences on the research and its findings being written in the style appropriate to the cultures of those audiences. We then turned to what others had written about 'style' to extract some basic principles to support the unique individual voice and still meet the academic requirements.

George Orwell's `Politics and the English Language' (1946) examines `ugly and inaccurate' written English. Echoing Orwell, we stressed the importance of concreteness and clarity, simplicity and transparency. Transparency takes us back to authenticity: `The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink' (1946: 15).

The participants were eager to draw on their cultural store of conceptual selves in their appraisal of Orwell's dictum, `If you simplify your English, you are freed of the worst follies of orthodoxy' (1946:20). A participant from the Middle East related a personal anecdote about her struggles with her identity as an Arab Muslim in Jerusalem. What had she learnt from the workshops?

Not to be afraid of writing simply – to express myself in brief sentences and not to sound like someone I've read and might admire.

Another participant,of African heritage and a scientist, was pleased that what he had learned with us was *a consolidation of the advice he had been given in his formative school boy years in a British pedagogical system.* Yet he had learned more with us – *he had learned to trust himself*: his writing was as good as other writing in that it was *his* writing and that it was his *authentic* voice that counted.

Our intentions at the conception of the idea of the workshops were bound up in our ideas about writing better and analysing in a deeper critical vein. The autobiographical dimension originated in paired and group discussions. We realised that in providing the conditions for participants to tell their stories in the clearest and most reflective way possible, the legitimacy of life writing became the cornerstone of professional learning. Eakin (1999:ix) illustrates the paradox of the `simple' autobiography:

> Autobiographical discourse tends to promote an illusion of disarming simplicity when it comes to self and self-experience (...) Use of the first person – the "I", autobiography's dominant key – compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of ourselves and stories; it not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organised than it possibly could be.

Each person can spend a life time exploring him or herself. `Self' here is less of an entity and more of `a kind of awareness in progress' (Eakin:ix). Using autobiographical writing as a means of developing professional practice became an unforeseen yet fortuitous and extraordinarily rich by-product of our original intentions.

Summary

The views, voices and experiences of the participants contributed significantly to our understanding of the critical autobiographical experience of learning in the professional/academic context. We would suggest that professional learning is not solely about acquiring professional knowledge, skills and competencies but concerns the negotiation of ourselves: our voices, our expressions, our relationships, our quests and our interaction with the people with whom we engage in our professional lives and the organisations in which we work. We observed an emergent sense of self as the workshop participants approached their own autobiographies in the spirit of cultural anthropologists. They came to recognise that the capacity to construct narrative deeply reflected a more cohesive sense of identity. The participants' confidence to

critique writers' works developed in parallel with the confidence to write. Furthermore, the confidence to write emerged from the tentative construction of critical autobiography. Ultimately, this approach – using critical autobiography to improve writing skills and deepen criticality – should make a contribution to the research on the education of adults and adult learning and close the gap between practitioner and academic knowledge.

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[i] The professional doctorate has been associated with the fields of education and engineering. However the last twenty years has seen this expand into all areas of professional practice across several sectors or domains. Middlesex University and other UK universities, in response to UK government initiatives in seeking knowledge exchange and research partnerships with professional, public, private and voluntary organisations, have developed a professional doctorate in professional studies and practice recognising the significant contribution which can be made to knowledge through researching and theorising practice to bring about changes in practice and thinking and resolve what have come to be termed sticky problems.

ii Eastman is a literature specialist and Maguire is both an anthropologist and trauma therapist with an interest in knowledge approaches for the future and translating across different realms of experience.

iii Four hours each over three semesters designed loosely enough so that they could be refocused to attend to issues as they arose from each successive workshop. Some of the participants had not been in higher education for several years, others had not been in higher education at all but were senior level professionals in their various fields of practice, managing high impact projects.

iv Level 8 descriptors are the criteria against which doctoral level study in the UK is assessed.

v Autoethnography is one of the evolving methodologies that is part of the suite of methodologies which combine critical reflection and transdisciplinarity.

vi Candidates' self-avowed goal in these workshops