

LOCATING SELF AT THE CENTRE OF LEARNING: THEORY, PRACTICE AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT *One o-going challenge for those teaching in higher education is to engage students in learning activities that are deemed meaningful and professionally relevant. Acknowledging this challenge, students in undergraduate and graduate papers at The University of Waikato have been introduced to using stories to analyse a range of satisfying and dissatisfying experiences. This process requires students to analyse and interpret the social construction of a lived experience through self and collective reflection of written memories. This paper comments on the process of having students connect between their everyday life and university study, provides a background to the memory-work methodology, and discusses how students can apply and respond to using this theoretical framework to acquire knowledge relevant to professional practice in the workplace.*

INTRODUCTION

Essentially, there are many ways of engaging tertiary students in the learning process. At one level it is relatively easy to entertain them by theorising about the topic of the day and extrapolate this to an aspect of community and/or the workplace. By contrast, it is more challenging to provide a context for learning that connects theory to life experiences in a way that is deemed by students to be both meaningful and purposeful. Achieving the latter is not easy but the benefits are worth striving for. When discussing the notion of teaching in higher education it was argued by Hamilton-Smith (1995) that one of our responsibilities is to help students search for new understandings and new strategies, for "if we fail to challenge students to join this process, then we are providing some sort of Clayton's veneer, and not a genuine education" (p. 8). In this paper the authors share the way they use an assessment task to challenge students whilst engaging them simultaneously in reflection, research and connecting theory to practice in the workplace.

PERSONAL STORIES AS KNOWLEDGE

We live "storied" lives. Personal stories provide case histories from which to draw inferences about human behaviour (Hannabuss, 2000), to develop, advance and/or disband theoretical perspectives of the phenomena being examined (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998). Furthermore, they can be used to promote an advanced understanding of an experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Stories invite reflection and tell us about our relation with our "selves" and our environment, while affirming and modifying who we are. The understanding we derive from these stories allows us to transform and grow (Friend & Thompson, in press). It does, therefore, seem appropriate to use stories in higher education to assist students overcome divergence between theory and practice and make strong

connections between life experiences and the phenomenon being studied (Smith, 1998). Furthermore, exposing students to a variety of methods by which new knowledge can be acquired is an effective way of equipping them to be more responsive and discerning about developments and practice in the workplace (Hounsell, 1997).

In spite of its struggle for legitimacy, incorporating subjective knowledge (e.g., stories) into the learning process offers a powerful medium for learning (Bain, 1995). Such knowledge allows students to work with authentic data derived from their own (and others') life experiences. As Nethersole (1993) suggested, one way to change how students conceptualise the world around them is to "build on their lived experiences and understandings by sharing what they know" (p. 99). In its most simple form, van Manen (1997) proclaims the "lived experience aims to establish renewed contact with original experience (p. 31) . . . it is the breathing of meaning" (p. 36). Furthermore, it focuses on the fundamental nature of the social world and locates the participants at the centre of what is being studied. As Bain (1990) suggests, "if we want to create a new world we must have new ways of viewing the world" (p. 9).

Whether or not we incorporate subjective knowledge into our programmes depends ultimately on how university teachers view the world. In a senior undergraduate (Level 3) Leisure Studies paper and a graduate (500 Level) Services Marketing paper student experiences are used to analyse and enhance an understanding of theory and practice relevant to the practice in the respective industry. In particular, students use stories to reflect on and analyse what contributes to their level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction in a personal experience (e.g., a retail encounter, attending a rock concert, participating in a fitness class, a package holiday, going to the theatre, a day's skiing, being a spectator at a sports event). The theoretical basis for the activity is located in a research process referred to as memory-work.

MEMORY-WORK

Theoretical Overview

Memory-work as developed by Haug and Others (1987) and modified by Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton (1992) analyses and interprets lived experiences through self and collective reflections of written memories. The focus of memory-work is to uncover the social constructions of experiences as they contribute to self-identity through person-cultural dialects. Memory-work documents the production of constructed meanings for the individual (i.e., self) and the collective of individuals through both self and group appraisal and reappraisal of one's own and the others' experiences for a given theme (Crawford, et al., 1992). Thus memory-work seeks to obtain a heightened understanding of lived experiences.

Advocates of memory-work consider that self is a social product and arises out of interactions with others. Memory-work incorporates theories from a variety of disciplines to analyse and explain activities, behaviours and emotions which occur in a person's memory and is based on phenomenology and hermeneutics (Friend & Thompson, 2000). It is phenomenological (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1962) in that it seeks to obtain, through a self-reflective analysis, that which is conscious to an individual regarding her/his lived experience. It is hermeneutic (e.g., Ricoeur,

1981) in that both the self and the collective reflective analyses of lived experiences are interpreted.

The underpinning of memory-work is that reality is not dualistic, as viewed in rationalism where human beings are seen to exist independently of their physical world (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). Rather, human experience is understood by relating its specific meaning(s) to other experiences and to overall context of the life-world. Priority is not given to either subjective experience or theory; rather it sets them in a reciprocal and mutual relationship. As Crawford et al. (1992) explain, "Meanings are constituted in action and action in meanings" (p. 38). Consequently, in memory-work the self is treated as both the "subject" and the "object" and the view that the subject and the object are independent entities is rejected. Knowledge of reality, therefore, is gained through interpretation.

When discussing how individuals attempt to make sense out of their actions and significant events in their life, Stephenson, Kippax and Crawford (1996) argue that "remembering and reflecting on experience are intimately bound up with the construction of self" (p. 183). In support of using self-reflection of experiences to interpret and thus better understand one's experiences, Kippax, Crawford, Benton, Gault and Noesjirwan (1988) claim it is through self-reflections that we make sense of our experience of the world and negotiate the meanings that we and others attach to them. Ricoeur (1991) extends this further when stating:

We understand ourselves only by the long detour of signs of humanity deposited in cultural works. What would we know about love, hate, moral feelings and, in general of all that we call the self if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature. Thus what seems most contrary to subjectivity, and what structural analysis discloses as the texture of the text, is the very medium within which we can understand (p. 87).

The Memory-Work Text

Memory-work stories provide the medium through which participants reconstruct a significant event(s) in their life in order to better understand the motives of the past and contemplate possible future actions. Besides past experiences being used to determine further actions, memories are also used to gain a sense of self. We talk with ourselves, as others do, in response to evaluations. Thus through textual interpretation of the written memories by self and others, participants gain meanings and intelligibility of their, and others' actions and emotions (Crawford, et al., 1992). Through memory-work texts Haug and Others (1987, pp. 40-43) argue that it is possible "to give an account of things we have actually done . . . without judging ourselves by the criteria of the culture." That is, participants can "arrive at a perception of self . . . without appearing inadequate" in relation to cultural views. However, they also note:

It is commonly argued that the lack of objective validity in subjective experience arises from individual propensity to twist and turn, reinterpret and falsify, forget and repress events, pursuing what is in fact no more than an ideological construction of individuality, giving oneself identity for the present to which the past are subordinated. It is therefore assumed that individuals' accounts of themselves and their

analyses of the world are not to be trusted, they are coloured by subjectivity (p. 43).

Memory-texts engage with the past by describing "what was subjectively significant" whereas other forms of story-telling, such as case histories and narrative accounts, engage in "what is and what has become subjectively significant" (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 38). They argue that what is remembered in memory-work is remembered because it is, in some way, problematic or unfamiliar, in need of review. The actions and episodes are remembered because they were significant and remain significant now. In this way, written memories create a new consciousness and promote a reflection of past events and actions which serve as the starting point for memory-work analysis and interpretation. Memory-stories are text written according to a set of rules to ensure that participants "write a description of a particular episode rather than an account or a general abstracted description" (Crawford, et al., 1992, p. 45). By rediscovering a given situation Haug and Others (1987) suggest:

. . . its smells, sounds, emotions, thoughts, attitudes - the situation itself draws us back into the past, freeing us for a time from notions of our present superiority over our past selves; it allows us to become once again . . . - a stranger - whom we once were . . . [In such a state] we find ourselves discerning linkages never perceived before. . . . By spotlighting one situation alone, we embark upon a form of archaeology. We discover fragments of an architecture which we begin to reconstruct (pp. 47-48).

The Memory-Work Process

In general, memory-work involves the analysis of written memories on a specific theme from self and all members of the collective. These memories are written according to prescribed rules which are to write:

- (i) a memory to a trigger about a specific episode;
- (ii) in third person where I is writing about s/he;
- (iii) in as much detail as possible including circumstantial and trivial detail; and
- (iv) without interpretation or biography.

By following the rules of writing memories in third person, participants are also apt to provide more detail without explanation or justification. Crawford et al. (1992, p. 47) argue that by writing in the third person the participant has a "bird's-eye" view of the scene and "reflects on herself or himself from the outside - from the point of view of the observer, and so is encouraged to describe rather than warrant". In so doing, the participants can step aside from their self interest, and write more fully and completely about past experiences.

In memory-work, the participants are viewed as co-researchers where they are their own subjects using their own experiences along with those of others in developing an understanding of both "then" and "now" through the collective's interpretation(s). The process requires the collective involvement of all participants in a structured group discussion. In turn, each member provides group members with her/his memory-text and reads it to the group. It is then reflected upon, analysed and interpreted by self and the collective. This involves analysing what is written as well as what is not written in the memories and

illustrates the importance of the role of self as an agent, a moral evaluator in analysing the social process which one engages (Friend & Rummel, 1995). Although conflict between the 'I' and 's/he' serves to challenge the notion of the individual entering into and resolving matters of contention, participants are encouraged to "discuss the memories in terms of shared understandings of social rather than individual circumstances" (Stephenson et al., 1996, p. 187).

The group discussion moves back and forth from analysing an individual memory to comparing all the memories for similarities and differences in a search for themes and meanings underlying the emotion, attitudes and behaviour (Friend & Rummel, 1995). During this phase the group notes such things as gaps, contradictions, and clichés in each memory-text endeavouring to uncover, as well as understand the shared rather than the individual circumstances. As the memories are discussed, the "memory-owner" simultaneously validates or invalidates the interpretation. In so doing Crawford et al. (1992) claim:

memory-work transcends the oppositions between the individualistic bias in psychological theory and structural theory that does not recognise agency. The meanings of the actions are not found in the actor's head but in the common meanings which s/he negotiates in the interactions with others (p. 54).

The extensive analysis process ultimately results in the memory-text being rewritten enabling the participants to "articulate and make credible the motives underlying the behaviour of others who feature in the memory" (Koutroulis, 1993, p. 73), as well as gaining a better understanding of their own motives (Haug, et al., 1987). However, Crawford et al. (1992) found the rewriting to be often a difficult and unproductive task. This is reinforced by some researchers (e.g., McCormack, 1995) who have eliminated the rewriting stage. Irrespective, the resultant analysis and interpretations can be related to existing theory and/or inform the individual about her/his own experience and change the way the respective experience is viewed. By focusing on self in this process it may also change the understanding of, and meanings attributed to, some aspects of practice in the workplace.

APPLICATION OF MEMORY-WORK IN CLASS

In our classes we (i.e., the authors) have our students examine a personal experience using the memory-work protocol outlined in the previous section. The process includes three phases: writing the story, analysing the story, and reanalysing the data in regards to the literature and writing the report.

Phase 1 - Writing the Memory-Story A couple of weeks prior to the story being required the students are provided with a brief overview of the up-coming assessment task. This allows sufficient time for them to write their story. In the Services Marketing class students write about a service encounter, and in the Leisure Studies class a leisure experience that has recently been purchased. In each case this relates to practice in the workplace. We ask that they write in third person and include explicit and detailed circumstantial, inconsequential and trivial information (e.g., smell, noises, visual images, emotions) to make the story rich in detail. The story should be a description rather than an explanation and justification. The use of a pseudonym is encouraged and several copies of the story

are brought to class on the designated date for the purpose of group analysis. An example of a memory-story follows.

Extract from Part of a Student Memory-Story

Jamie pulled up outside the skydiving headquarters. "Well girls. It's now or never," she said as they piled out of the car. There was a sense of excitement and nervousness. "What a primo day," she thought. There was barely a cloud to be seen and it was really warm.

"Oh golly, what have I got myself into," Jamie thought as she passed across her EFTPOS card and paid the \$170. "Too late now so it had better be great."

"Hi, I'm Brendon," said a tall skinny guy who was going to be Jamie's jump master.

"Hi, I'm Jamie," she answered back thinking, "He looks a bit of a geek, I hope he's OK".

Feeling a bit awkward, and becoming more nervous as time ticked by, Jamie walked out to the deck with Brendon and proceeded to learn about the jump. She did as instructed, putting one foot after the other into the harness and let herself be strapped in. Brendon continued to explain what would happen when they fell out off the plane and how they would do the manoeuvre called the big banana. "Ha, what a cool name," Jamie mumbled to herself.

"Time for action," called Brendon. Jamie knelt down on her knees with him tight behind her. "Lean your body into mine as hard you can," he said. Soon her arms were held back and legs wrapped around his. A few more times and Brendon approved. "Right, that's it."

Jamie thought this seems rather simple. "What about, um . . . surely there is more to jumping out of a plane than just the big banana thing," Jamie said in a bewildered voice. Brendon seemed unconcerned as he untangled a few ropes.

The smile on Jamie's face widened as she tried to hide her nervousness. The clock was running down and it was finally time to go. With some hesitation Jamie pulled herself up off the deck and started walking past the safety barrier and out to the waiting plane. Carrying her helmet and goggles in a sweaty hand, she clambered into the plane after Helen, Dave and their jump masters. She waved frantically at the camera and then slumped back and let the thrill of what was about to happen wash over her.

Just after take off the jump masters went over the big banana once more and then it was just a matter of waiting. At 7000 feet one of the jump masters yelled to the pilot, "It's time for the altitude check."

"Sure guys, check your watches," he shouted back. Brendon was showing Jamie his altitude watch when all of a sudden the plane started screaming straight down. "Oh my god" was all Jamie could scream before she grabbed Brendon just before hitting her head on the cabin.

"We thought that would get you going," laughed Brendon.

In too short a time they were at 9000 feet and Jamie was undergoing the final act of clipping in. The plastic door rolled up and without a moment's hesitation Brendon had Jamie positioned on the edge of the plane and getting ready to jump. Her heart was pounding. She had never been this scared in her life. She just had time to fix the helmet and goggles, look down at the ground before Brendon yelled, "BIG BANANA". Jamie wrapped herself around him like she had been taught and fell out into the sky.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh" she screamed as they went hurtling at a crazy speed straight towards the ground. Too afraid to open her eyes she let the wind rush around her face and she screamed some more. Upon opening her eyes she gasped as saw this mass of blue, and then without warning there was a jolt and she felt like she was being lifted up from behind. Suddenly they were almost sitting still. The parachute had opened. "Oh my God, wahoo, Oh my God," she exclaimed over and over again. "This is amazing, fantastic, I love it," she yelled at Brendon who was at last guiding them 'safely' towards earth. "This is bloody fantastic". ... [the story continues]

Phase 2 - Analysing the Memory-Stories During class, students work in small groups to share and engage in the reflective analysis process of their respective memory-stories. First, one group member reads her/his story, then through a process of questioning the group members identify key elements of the experience. They endeavour to do this without making judgemental statements regarding what they believe should or should not have occurred in relation to the experience. Once all stories are subjected to this process the group then questions and analyses gaps, cliches, contradictions, metaphors, and inconsistencies in the memory stories, providing a thick description of the experience recalled.

Throughout this process students are encouraged to take extensive notes as this provides additional detail to that given in the original stories. This ensures that students have sufficient detail beyond the stories to examine a number of aspects such as why the expectations prior to the experience were or were not fulfilled, the type of interactions that occurred during the encounter, what significant events contributed to making the experience satisfying or dissatisfying, and the way the atmosphere contributed to the experience of the student as a consumer. The group discussion and analysis ends when the students have completed a thorough analysis and a coherent picture emerges. It can, however, be difficult to know at what point the stories have been subjected to sufficient analysis. Sparkes (1992) claims:

for interpretativists there are no absolute minimums to work out differences in interpretations since the hermeneutic process has no

definite beginning or end and contains no specific procedures or established criteria to determine who has got it absolutely “right” or “true” (p. 36).

What was deemed as being real and valid in this type of learning activity is so because each student through her/his writing and group discussion of the memory-text assesses and affirms the experience. This reflects the views of Denzin (1997) who states there is always a struggle over the real meanings of any text as “there can never be a final and accurate representation of what was meant or said” (p. 12). The students use the stories to develop a framework for writing that representation.

Phase 3 - Further Analysis and Writing the Report Students work individually to further reflect on the information obtained from the group analysis and endeavour to create a comprehensive understanding of the how and why particular meanings are attached to the experiences. Identification of common themes and irregularities help connect each of the stories. This process involves each student making inferences derived from the stories as well as connections to the literature in a way to verify, expand and/or disband a given theory. Students at graduate level also are encouraged to critique the literature and to use the data to advance theory. For the purpose of this checking trustworthiness the students are encouraged to seek clarification from other group members for accuracy of interpretation. However, we should keep in mind that each person takes from the research story, that which she or he wants to believe to be true (Denzin, 1997). Therefore, students can only produce a text [paper] that reproduces versions of the real. As this learning activity requires adopting a different genre to the more conventional assignments in higher education, students often struggle to produce an informative paper which captures a reality without losing the richness and essence of the meaning.

Student Response The worth of using memory-work to promote learning in the two university papers has been subject to a variety of formal and informal evaluations. All have been favourable and support memory stories as a way to merge theory and practice through real life experiences. However, at first there is often a considerable degree of scepticism as well as apprehension by students about the potential worth of such a learning activity. Their initial concerns seem to relate primarily to using subjective knowledge and theory as a basis for examining the relationship between workplace practice and personal experience. We believe the following comments collected from students using memory-work over recent years capture the feeling of all classes.

I really felt the memory-work project made the theory real.

It was one of the hardest assignments I’ve had to do during my five years at university, but one of the ones that I’ve learned the most from.

Many of the students in the class weren’t familiar with qualitative research. Many of us had our minds set on quantitative methods, thus it was difficult to grasp what the objectives and processes were . . . but it was an excellent tool.

Compared to other assignments I actually found this one quite difficult because I had never been involved in a qualitative study.

The actual data collection was fun for everyone. There was a real buzz about sharing your story with others.

It was a learning process . . . It was interesting how many different viewpoints would come across in the discussion.

After doing the memory-work assignment I convinced the management team that it was important for us to do some qualitative research besides just doing a survey so we could understand what was happening.

CONCLUSION

The most common teaching practice in higher education is to delve into the writings of others and use these ideas and data as a basis to develop an understanding of the subject matter (Sessoms, 1995). Hence, connecting theory with experiences and beliefs during undergraduate and graduate education is not easy to achieve. In spite of the rhetoric about what to do there is no easy solution. Students tend to be receptive to and retain objective research-based knowledge (Lawson, 1990). However, others such as Bain (1995) and Kerry and Armour (2000) contend it can be a challenge when one adopts alternative ways of knowing such as phenomenology and dealing with subjective knowledge. Nevertheless, Hounsell (1997) argues "when something has been genuinely understood, it has been related by students to their prior knowledge and experience and it is perceived as helping them make sense of the world around them" (p. 240). Although not the panacea to achieving such an outcome, the memory-work process offers one method whereby students are producers of and not just consumers of knowledge. Thus they are able to make direct and meaningful connections between theoretical perspectives and workplace practices. Moreover, the student's voice is central to and contextualised within the resultant meanings and discovery of knowledge. As Hunt (1993) stated:

From a multitude of stories we can draw inferences about human behaviour, inferences in which we are confident because we have heard [or read] them so many times that it is accepted as valid. We can repeatedly seek key insights to be gained from the stories. As we learn more we will gain additional insights from those stories (p. 41).

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