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Exploring Co-produced Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores co-produced autoethnography in the development of situated leadership practice of a Chief Operating Officer (COO). The argument for using an autoethnographic approach is in response to accepted problems of researching the development of leadership practice. The approach of a co-produced narrative is outlined and illustrated with two empirical accounts. The paper makes a contribution to understanding the usefulness of autoethnographic research and its justification as a suitable method for social scientists to use alongside more traditional approaches.

Key word: Autoethnography, Narrative Analysis

UNDERSTANDING SITUATED LEADERSHIP PRACTICE THROUGH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Within the field of leadership learning there is a general acceptance that leadership practice is predominately learnt through informal experiences drawn out from everyday events, notably within organisational contexts (McCall 2004). However researchers have also acknowledged that such learning is tacit in nature and difficult to reveal in terms of the influences and processes of such learning ([Author] 2006). This paper responds to this call for a greater understanding of such learning processes. To overcome the problematic nature of revealing tacitly learnt practice we chose to use co-produced autoethnography as a method appropriate to unearth context rich, qualitative insights through in-depth reflexive writing. The substantive focus of the research was on understanding the situated learning experiences of James Stewart. (Not the famous actor from the film 'It's a wonderful life'; but the COO at the centre of this study!) We sought to understand how James had begun to learn the practice of a COO in his context.

The connection of the personal to the cultural as the central theme of autoethnography (Ellis and Bouchner 2005) resonates with our research aim: to discern the development of situated leadership practice over a discrete period. The learning we wish to focus on is situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). The tacit nature of such learning has been highlighted in Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella (1998) who also explore methodological difficulties of revealing such learning and associated development of situated practice. The difficulty of revealing the learning and the development of

practice that occurs through the flux of everyday events (Burgoyne and Hodgson 1983; Davies and Easterby-Smith 1984; McCall 2004) is the problem we wish to address. In order to this we argue for the use of autoethnography. As a consequence of such an approach this paper seeks to provide a methodological contribution by exploring the application of co-produced autoethnography to management learning and the development of management practice.

The paper first outlines the nature of autoethnography and reviews our underpinning epistemological and methodological principles. Subsequently we outline the method used for creating a co-produced autoethnographic account drawing on extant theory to create Ellis's (2004:198) notion of a 'narrative sandwich' of empirical reflections critically interpreted by relevant theory. Two incidents drawn for the diary of James Stewart (the COO) from the autoethnographic sandwich are illustrated. The paper concludes with a discussion on the value of autoethnographic research for social science and its useful application in understanding situated leadership practice.

THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

What can we learn from autoethnographic accounts about leadership learning and leadership practice if it is simply the reflections of an individual? How is such an autoethnographic account valuable as a contribution and how can it be considered useful for social science?

The epistemological tenets of reliability, validity and generalisation are treated very differently within autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000) in comparison with the prominent traditional scientific approach of positivism. An autoethnographic account seeks to illuminate the experience of history through a story narrative. Examining autoethnography along a continuum of science, looking at facts at one end, and art as the exploration of the meaning behind the experience at the other end, we will position the story in the middle; building out from a detailed diary towards a co-constructed story. Reliability is thus towards honesty and truthfulness (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) of capturing the account of James's learning of becoming a COO. Bochner (2001) argues that reliability is anchored through the narrative being interconnected with life. Through the process of writing the narrative (see particularly Richardson (2000), notion of writing as a process of inquiry) authenticity of

the account becomes meaning and self-understanding for the autoethnographer (Bochner 2001: 153); reliability is thus seen as a process of internal triangulation (similar to arguments of Janesick 1998).

For validity the story needs to have 'verisimilitude': 'evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 751). As a consequence issues of reliability and validity must resonate with the reader. Boyle and Parry (2007) argue that generalization needs to be detached away from issues of 'n' number: 'We would suggest that the critical 'n' factor is the number of people who read the research, rather than the number of people who are the subjects of the research' (2007: 6). Similarly Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that generalization is tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Stake (1994) argues for 'naturalistic' generalization as felt news from one world to another that provides a vicarious experience for the reader (in this case appreciating James's experience of becoming a senior business leader). For us the substantive goal of the autoethnographic account is to provide an insight to the complex background process of situated learning associated with the practice of becoming a senior business leader.

Co-constructed Autoethnography

We have described the case for utilizing an autoethnographic study. We wish to outline the method of co-constructed autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000) used in this research. The focus of the study, the *ethno*, is James Stewart within a specific culture. The approach places emphasis on the writing and describing, the *graphy*, of the three months from January to March in 2007: the initial period of becoming a COO. The spirit of this *ethno-graphy*, in the form of personal reflectivity (Tierney and Lincoln 1997), leads to a creative aesthetic narrative (Boyle and Parry 2007) or a creative analytic practice ethnography (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self, *auto*; an ability to notice our responses to the self within a social context world (Reed-Danahay 1997). Autoethnography does not merely require us to explore the interface between culture and self; it requires us to write about ourselves. It is the conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

It is through this conscious exploration that we sought to illuminate the complex processes of relational and situated learning of leadership practice through a reflexive, episodic self-narrative. Important to the method of co-constructed narrative is the notion that narrative and life can be seen as inextricably connected. Life both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it: 'narrative is both about living and part of it' (Bochner 2001: 153). Thus, the story of James will be more than a process of recounting and reflecting, but also helps develop a narrative, social and relational sense of himself within a particular context. To help in that endeavour we have drawn on the work of Ricoeur (1992) – in terms of an emplotted narrative identity; and the work of Czarniawska (1997) – as a structure through which the emplotted narrative can be organised as a serial. Ellis argues that an important aspect of autoethnographical research is provided in story creation by a continual re-appraisal and interpretation of the story through theorising. Ellis describes this combined approach as a 'sandwich'; a story with academic literature and theory on both sides (Ellis 2004: 198).

The theoretical part of the 'sandwich' draws upon Lave and Wenger's (1991; Wenger 1998) notion of legitimate peripheral participation, and Gherardi et al.'s (1998) associated notion of situated curriculum. Both of these concepts relate to learning as situated where 'knowing is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities' (Gherardi et al. 1998: 274). Participating in a practice becomes a way to acquire knowledge-in-action (Gherardi (2000: 215) and a sense of becoming relates to a newcomer progressing from apprentice to master through involvement in a community practice (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29). The role and the pathway provide a 'situated curriculum' (Gherardi et al. 1998: 279) seen as a pattern or order of activities that enable novices to engage with a specific community in the process of legitimate participation along a pathway that enables them to become full members.

The work of Cunliffe (2001, 2002) encourages a dialogic approach to management learning. She sees learning framed within an embodied process where 'the learning process may be seen as a discursive contextualized and on-going practice constructed in the moment' (2001: 45). We suggest that a co-produced autoethnographic account causes a dialogue to occur that focuses on illuminating and linking tacit and explicit knowledge of social and relational practice by probing, with related

theory, deeper in a reflexive manner. Such a process enacts Cunliffe's model of reflective and reflexive dialogue (2002: 43).

Data Capture: The Professional Diary

Richardson (2000) argues that writing can in itself become a method of inquiry. Rather than being limited to see writing as a mode of telling about the social world he argues that we might want to see writing as also a way of knowing: 'A method of discovery and analysis' (2000: 923). In this spirit, James explores the process of initial data capture into his diary:

In writing my professional diary, over the three-month period between January and 31st March 2007, I record what I observe, hear, overhear and worry about that connects my personal life to my professional one. I record my entries seeing the business world from my own and different colleagues perspectives. I capture my day-to-day experiences, relationships with senior people and my participation with business colleagues enacting my role as COO. I also record my thoughts on social influences within the company environment and their subsequent impact on my motivation. I develop my notes each evening as writer-interpreter and build my research text for subsequent analysis. My diary serves three purposes. First, I have an evolutionary and development record of my thoughts and experiences that I relate to my literature. Second, I have a personal account of my thoughts and actions that I can relate to my lived experience. Third, I establish a grammatical map of the mental and emotional business territory in which I work.

The Co-produced Narrative

Gathering the story is familiar and comparatively easy; the problem usually arises at the stage of analysis (Etherington 2006). Through a repeating process of creating a narrative and then having that narrative examined in detail, James became highly reflexive of himself as both inquirer and respondent: coming to know the self within the process of research. Guided by Ellis (2004), the co-produced narrative 'sandwich' was developed by drawing on and being interrogated by [the co-author] with themes from extant learning theory previously outlined. Four cycles of narrative writing,

describing and critiquing occurred until James felt that the narrative was, in a theoretical sampling sense, saturated and further iterations would undermine issues of reliability and validity.

The use of self, as the only data source in autoethnography, has been questioned and criticized for being self-indulgent and narcissistic (Sparkes 2000) and Garrett and Hodkinson, (1999) suggest that such accounts do not sit comfortably with traditional criteria used to judge qualitative inquires. The difficulty of valid and reliable analysis in autoethnographic work reflects the iterative and reflexive process of building the story. Richardson suggests criteria for judging ethnographic studies namely: expression of reality and aesthetic merit and impact (2005: 937). We will revisit these criteria under the discussion that follows extracts from the co-produced autoethnography.

BECOMING A CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER (COO)

In this paper we wish to illustrate the use of autoethnography to help inform on the development of leadership practice through exposing the tacit and explicit situated learning and specifically the situated curriculum and dialogic relationships. To this end we will not explore the complete story of the three months – this will form the basis of a subsequent paper on situated curriculum and the development of leadership practice. Rather we will illustrate two examples of Ellis (2004) notion of a co-produced narrative sandwich.

January 6th - 9.15: ‘And the men who spurred us on’ (*The Who: Won't get fooled again, 1971*). A **dialogic exchange**

Then it all began with the telephone ringing. I lift the receiver; it's a call from a leading member of our investor team. "Good morning James, trust you had an enjoyable Christmas." The opening pleasantries evaporate as the conversation focuses on the pre-Christmas investor concerns. He continues, "Yes we have had some interesting discussions in a number of areas over the Christmas period and we now think there is a role for a new Chairman to support the CEO at the strategic level". I listen intently, this is breaking news! No mention of this before Christmas or indeed any indication from the CEO. Perhaps he did not know anything about it? If that's the case confidence in the CEO may have deteriorated somewhat, but surely he's is not going to be ousted? I'm clearly not going to get a honeymoon period!

I find myself slightly uneasy as I try to analyse my response whilst in the process of responding. It's not that I feel out of depth and neither do I feel intimidated; it's more a case of trying to quickly come to terms with a higher more confidential form of discussion than I had not been previously party to; I guess I should have expected conversations of this nature to occur – it comes with the territory when you step up a level. I've been given access to a new community that sits higher up than the community of managers within the business that I've always dealt with.

The confidentiality and potential impact on the business made the nature of the conversation so very different to other conversations. Being in possession of information and knowledge that would trigger all forms of rumour mongering at all levels across the business should it be leaked. So I am now trusted with information that previously would have been denied to me – my views are now actively being sought as a new member of the Board. I am now trusted not to disclose this information, not even to the CEO. Such trust and knowledge must be handled in a different way; it's for my ears and mine alone. I resist the temptation to run to my nearest colleague and 'spill the beans' as well I might have done prior to my appointment previously. So now I am beginning to think like a COO and I now have to address the issues emanating from my need to build loyalty to the Board. Equally, I sense the need to avoid Board loyalty being viewed as disloyalty to the CEO. I still have my strong moral feelings over the potential impact on both the CEO position and in particular, the detrimental impact on my personal loyalty to him. A new set of conflicting issues of ethics, loyalty and ambiguity are swirling around my mind and this feels very different – I feel like a novice in this role. I wonder whether others realise this.

The story illustrates Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation. The legitimacy of the COO role provides James with access to a situated curriculum (Gherardi et al. 1998). The notion of situated curriculum is seen to provide situated opportunities that allow the 'novice' COO to engage with others who are active members of specific communities. The opening of the story has illustrated the specific community as being the 'Senior Management Board'. The

telephone conversation with one of the investors illustrated the welcoming of the novice into the community and a sense of the expectations, privileges and constraints that this will imply. This was very much a new experience for James, as expressed with his discomfort that such expectations brought. Wenger (1998: 152) talks about how the legitimate peripheral participation within particular communities is interconnected with notions of identity construction. James exhibits a strong sense that although he has put on the clothes of the senior manager he is uncomfortable wearing these. He has moved out of one community (the middle management group) and entered a new community (the Board group). He is searching to understand the nature of this identity in this situated community. The opening dialogic exchange (Cunliffe 2002) with the investor has begun to help him construct this new identity and this is an aspect of the situated curriculum; a further aspect of the situated curriculum is the different nature of problems in terms of the scale and scope of issues that were discussed with the investor. Cunliffe (2002) describes processes of dialogic practice as constructing a sense of self through everyday conversations. The conversation with the investor illustrates an example of how 'we make sense of what is happening around us as we talk' (Cunliffe 2002: 37).

January 28th: 'Smile and grin at the change all around' – Power and identity within situated learning

By the end of January the anticipated rumour mongering is rife amongst the senior and middle management teams and it is becoming increasingly hard to keep management focussed on the strategy, since the consensus is what's the point, the strategy will change anyway. The CEO is becoming less and less prominent in his decision making.

At our weekly meeting I decide that we must do something. I point out my concerns: "It's becoming increasingly hard to keep the team focussed and it's not helped by the negativity of certain directors and the individual concerns over shares, options, roles and impending arrival of the new chairman. We need to elevate this to Board level". He seems pleased that I'm pushing the point and I wonder whether he sees this as a public sign of loyalty to him and the team. He agrees that we table the need for transparency and to "voice

our collective concern over the development of these small emerging yet distracting communities.

I sense that I am becoming responsible for issues that are the CEO's. I seem to be filling the vacuum. For the last three weeks I have been out and about, pushing for targets, rewarding and punishing direct reports. Its now more than an act of looking like a COO; I think they accept my authority but also trade with me in ways that I recognise but the stakes are much bigger. The access to decisions and influence are changing me and changing their relationship with me. I find the staff are now approaching me with an increasing number of personal and professional issues. It's almost like the "messiah" has emerged within them to answer all the questions that they have never had answered or perhaps dared to ask?

I step out of the CEO's office as the FD enters the room. After the meeting, two of the founding members of the company approach me for a chat (both non-statutory directors). "What's the latest, have you heard when the new man is arriving; you must know what's going on?" Now this is an interesting situation I muse to myself. Here we have two of our founding members who are entirely focussed on what is happening for purely personal reasons. "Come on James; there are too many huddled conversations going on, we are all in this together. The FD has now gone into the CEO's office? There's something going on!" I choose to sideline the questions to preserve the confidentiality implicit within my discussion with the investors but not without a degree of difficulty, after all these people are friends as well as colleagues. "It's just the investor group pressing for information and updates on where we are with the strategy", I reply but I clarify further: "As always, any involvement with these people normally results in change of some nature."

Reflecting on these comments was a watershed for me. Asserting confidence and being accepted by others, particularly directors and shareholders as a central player in a strategic community. I recalled, with some comfort, around being strong in terms of integrity. But I also wonder whether I compromised some strategic aspects through loyalty to the senior team. "Listen guys, best thing you can both do is to get focussed on hitting your targets and managing your teams; we can deal with any investor fall out in the fullness of time and when

we all have clarity as to what exactly is going on". A disgruntled moan from both indicates their combined frustration and negativity.

James has become central to the activities of the senior team. The privilege information and involvement with key members of the team are recognised by more peripheral participants. They seek both information and advice from James. Such interactions are themselves examples of situated curriculum in the sense that such conversations become enactments of leadership that provide additional situated experience. The story reveals a shift in power within the discourses. Both in the formal team setting where James provides the lead role that would have previously been given by the CEO; but also within the informal chats with colleagues. Within both Lave and Wenger (1991: 86) and Gherardi et al. (1998: 279) there is only limited discussion of power within notions of situated curriculum and in particular legitimate peripheral participation. In the context of practicing leadership power is, in a sense, axiomatic. However, learning to handle such power, we argue, is a salient issue of leadership learning and thus part of the situated curriculum for the development of leadership practice. A further aspect of the situated curriculum of leadership learning and leadership practice is that of ethics. This was alluded to when handling confidential information with close colleagues and becomes a central aspect of James journey of becoming a senior leader further on.

DISCUSSION

The autoethnographic approach has been most helpful to illuminate tacit processes of situated learning associated with James understanding his sense of becoming. The reflective dialogic process through probing and reflective questioning has unearthed a deeper appreciation of his journey. That is important to James in terms of his management learning. But in what way is it a useful contribution to our understanding of learning to become a senior manager? Richardson (2000:937) provides guidance through two themes and associated questions:

- **Expression of reality:** Does the story seem credible as a cultural, social or individual account of reality? Does the story have a sense of 'verisimilitude': 'a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 751). As a consequence, issues of reliability and validity must resonate with the reader as to whether it

speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know; or it provides a vicarious learning experience for the reader (Stake 1994), in this case a glimpse at the developing practice of senior leadership.

- **Aesthetic merit and impact:** Does the story invite interpretive responses? Boyle and Parry argue that autoethnographic generalization should focus on the number of people who read the research and are affected by it rather than the number of people who are the subjects of the research (2007: 188). This argument relates to the aesthetic quality of the narrative in terms of being memorable, affective both intellectually and emotionally, or reflexively informative to the readers experience of, for example, developing leadership practice. A corollary to aesthetic quality is the impact that the autoethnography has in terms of stimulating further research.

These two aspects have been central in the writing process. The degree of success in producing an account to convey a sense of the reality and whether this has an effect on the reader is beyond our control. For James success is having a deeply reflexive appreciation of his insight into the relational nature of the leadership practice that is integrated within his narrative identity. As such, Richardson's (2000) proposition that writing as a method of inquiry has resonated with James. It is to this last point that the autoethnographic approach may be of considerable value as a tool for exposing the tacit and situated nature of the development of leadership practice. This is not a new area in itself (for example, the work of Cunliffe 2001, 2002 described earlier in the paper), but in the field of leadership learning helps the exploration of the interface of learning and the development of leadership practice.

The use of co-produced autoethnography has significant practitioner benefits as a process for management learning. In part it reflects notions of coaching by working with the manager to understand herself through constructing her narrative identity. We suggest that the writing and re-writing of this narrative through an organised reflexive dialogue (Cunliffe, 2001) may be a useful process for formal leadership development interventions. Again further research in this area would be appropriate.

A reasonably sceptical reader may question whether autoethnographers are scientists. The emphasis on aesthetic quality, affect, resonance and memorability are not usually found in the epistemological lexicon of scientists. But if we wish to gain a greater understanding of social practice the autoethnographic turn may be a useful addition to our research methods, particularly if the phenomenon under investigation has been shown to be difficult to reveal. Undoubtedly this is the case with illuminating the development of situated leadership practice.

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