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# Ethnographies and Identities: The Transformation of Pre-service Teachers

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## Abstract

Forms of social inquiry conducted and reported through literature and the arts have received considerable attention (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Gray, 2003; Richardson, 2000; Sclater, 2003; Scott-Hoy, 2003; Thorp, 2003). Recently, further links with autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) and Creative Analytic Practices (Richardson, 2000) have been forged. This paper examines performance, display and exhibition in the professional studies component of our teacher education programs at The University of Melbourne, Australia. Over three years from 2002 our students have assembled a repertoire of devices for thinking about themselves becoming teachers. Among other things, they have created 'operas' in which the transformation of personal and professional identity is a key theme. In this paper we outline processes leading to performance and examine autoethnography and performance ethnography as theoretical bases for this approach and innovation in teacher education.

## Introduction

Drawing on contemporary forms of qualitative research such as performance ethnography (McCall, 2000), autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992) and using narrative and writing as forms of inquiry (Richardson, 1990; 1992; 1995a; 1995b; 1997; 1999; 2000), this research project constructs a 'learning through' (Gardner, 1983; 1993; 1995; 1999; 2003a; 2003b) approach to curriculum within pre-service teacher education. During 2002 we initiated the first curriculum opera (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon, White, & Smerdon, 2003) in our Faculty of Education with thirty-seven students. In 2003 we developed this learning and teaching approach with twice as many students and extended it to include an art installation and the production of radio programs. We also reconsidered assessment of students involved in the opera for overall theoretical consistency. As students increasingly took control, they 'imagined curriculum' (Doll & Gough, 2002) and transformed their exploration of identity in the 'process of becoming' teachers (Britzman, 2003). In this paper, we outline the opera project and have left discussion of other initiatives for another paper.

### *Ethnography*

The fundamental 'methods' of conducting research in traditional anthropology and sociology, from which qualitative inquiry grew, were through the use of interviews and participant observation. Together these were considered the basis of ethnography has taken a range of perspectives and genres (Tedlock, 2003, p. 459). Researchers from all sorts of disciplines have adopted and transformed ethnography over the past thirty years (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. vii). Tedlock (2003) points to 'an unsettling of the boundaries that had been central to the notion of a self studying an other' (p. 174).

Increasingly, researchers include their own ethnographic fieldwork (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). Classic ethnography meant the study of 'others' by outsiders and involved its proponents gaining access to other cultures. Postcolonialist, postmodernist, poststructuralist, feminist and queer theory challenged this traditional view of ethnography and in more recent times voice in ethnographic studies. For some, 'The observer and the observed are not entirely separate categories…theory is not a transparent, culture-free zone, not a duty-free intellectual market-place hovering between cultures, lacking all connection to embodied, lived experience' (Tedlock, 2003) (p. 184). Ruth Behar (1996) describes anthropology as 'the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, and necessary form of witnessing left to us at the end of the twentieth century' (p. 5). Geertz (1995) commented that 'You don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you'. In Denzin's words,

> [I]t is no longer possible to take for granted what is meant by ethnography. The classic realist ethnographic text is now under attack…self-reflexivity in ethnography is no longer a luxury…the writer can no longer presume to be able to present an objective, noncontested account of the other's experiences. Those we study have their own understandings of how they want to be represented (Denzin, 1997) (p. xiii).

Increasingly, the forms that ethnographies take indicate significant changes of emphases and focus. In the following paragraphs we briefly outline three major contemporary approaches to ethnography that have informed our methodology and practice.

### *Autoethnography*

Two particular forms of ethnography have informed our methodology in this study. In contrast to traditional masculinist ethnography, autoethnography is essentially the study of the self. Autoethnography is described by its main proponents Carolyn Ellis and

Arthur Bochner (2000) as 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (p. 739). Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain that autoethnography can be considered 'a good opportunity to show how important it is to make the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right' (p. 733).

### Performance Ethnography

Over the past three decades ethnographers have also been turning their readings of the field into performances. In his study of US Midwestern women farmers, Michael McCall (2000) invited his participants to represent their life with found objects, to photograph and to tell of their identities. This became his field data from which he then created a script for performance, entitled: 'Not "Just" a Farmer and Not Just a "Farmwife"' (McCall, 2000, p. 426). McCall advises that performance ethnography requires the ethnographer to write a script and then cast and perform it.

### Poststructural Ethnography

Deborah Britzman's (2003) influential study examines ethnography from poststructural perspectives. She points out that in traditional ethnography the 'ethno' in ethnography has had far greater focus than the 'graphy'. Ethnographers and readers of ethnography have traditionally valued *what* has been described rather than the *how* it has been written. The way ethnographies are written, how 'culture is narrated' is a focus for Britzman who points out that conventional ethnography is developed through specific methods, that contain both the promise of easy access to a culture and that 'good ethnographic texts tell

stories that invariably embody qualities of a novel' (p. 243). She also comments pointedly that:

> These qualities of narrative are seductive in the power they bestow. There is a belief and expectation that the ethnographer is capable of producing truth from the experience of being there and that the reader is receptive to the truth of the text…The reader learns to expect cultural secrets and may well suppose that outsiders can become vicarious insiders (Britzman, 2003) (p. 244).

She argues that 'the ground upon which ethnography is built turns out to be a contested and fictive geography' (Britzman, 2003) (p. 244). She points to the language devices used in the creation of these fictions posing as truth. She critiques traditional ethnographies from a poststructural perspective and draws attention to the 'slippery' nature of the writing and the 'slippage' that is an inevitable partiality of this form of writing. She challenges ethnographic authority in three ways:

1. The authority of empiricism
2. The authority of language
3. The authority of reading or understanding

and questions the privileging of some cultural practices being noted over others. She comments that 'For poststructuralists, representation is always in crisis, knowledge is constitutive of power, and agency is the constitutive effect, and not the originator, of situated practices and histories' (Britzman, 2003, p. 246).

In this research we take elements from each of these three contemporary ethnographic approaches. From these, we take the possibilities suggested: performance, the study and ownership of the self and the partiality and fragmented nature of knowledge. We do not write the script and nor do we 'study' the students as 'others' (Said, 1978).

### *Opera*

> The beauty of opera is the way it brings together several different art forms (music, drama, and visual arts) to make one incredible theatrical experience. Opera unifies a whole range of passions and themes: the triumph of love, love

unrequited, lust for wealth and power, unexpected joy, murderous jealousy, the corruption of innocence, sexual infidelity, and political intrigue (Fielding, 2002).

In this project, we have been witness to and participant in their emergent professional and personal identities as they struggle with the conflicting sites of their professional learning in schools and then in the university (Moss et al., 2004). In this paper we provide a critical reading of a text of practice, a text of learning to teach. This includes both our learning as teacher educators and the learning of our students. We provide a 'libretto', if you like, that outlines the narrative or plot about the development of the opera. This narrative documents the exploratory project we developed with pre-service teachers in both primary and secondary teacher education programs at the University of Melbourne during 2002, 2003 and into 2004. We discuss the development of this teaching and learning approach together with our three major concerns:

1. the significance of 'learning through' approach and student ownership,

2. assessment of knowledge construction and identity formation, and

3. methodological traces and influences from our research work on our teaching.

In 2002, we initiated a project in which students developed an opera about curriculum. As explained earlier (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon et al., 2003), the opera was initially conceived as a research project focused on two central questions:

1. To what extent is the understanding of multiple intelligences by pre-service teachers improved by 'learning through'? (Gardner, 1999);

2. Can pre-service teachers address fundamental issues in curriculum and assessment through the development of a performance? (p.3).

While we were interested in using opera as a medium for learning, we saw it as only one part of the class time and operating alongside other learning approaches. The 'real' and 'proper' learning still occurred in the form of workshop activities to support content that had been presented in lectures. The students' reflection and comments about the opera were a small part of the overall subject assessment. It was an 'add-on' if you like. However, the student response to the opera experience was powerful and intense. As reported earlier (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon et al., 2003), 'the student learning went beyond the expectations and boundaries we set as the students revealed ownership and articulation of their learning processes' (p.5). As a result we decided to reflexively reconceptualise what we were aiming to do and how we would develop and improve this process of 'learning through' (Gardner, 1993, 2003a). These changes had implications for three significant aspects of the project – the approach to teaching in the subject, the assessment process and the methodological positioning of the project.

> Opera should engage you to the point where you see with your ears and hear with your eyes. You are so overwhelmingly involved in the experience, you can't tell where one sense ends and another begins (Fielding, 2002).

The subject in which the opera project occurred, 'Curriculum & Assessment', is a core subject for over eight hundred students and is delivered through a weekly one-hour lecture and three-hour workshops for groups of about thirty students at a time. In 2002 the three-hour workshop had included the opera amongst other activities. The initial opera experience had revealed the possibilities for learning in a situation characterized by student ownership (Kezar, 2001) and 'learning through' (Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1995,

1999, 2003a, 2003b) process. We were convinced that learning about curriculum and assessment came *through* their opera-work rather than from workshop activities *about* curriculum and assessment. In 2003 we gave the workshop over entirely to the development of the opera. Further, the issue of 'ownership' had implications for our teacher role. While in 2002, we had been 'producers' of the opera, and had called in artistic expertise to 'direct' the performance, in 2003, the students took *ownership* of the project.

> You don't have to know a lot about opera to understand what makes a good performance, because when opera is good, you will know it on a gut level (Fielding, 2002).

The change in the teaching demanded a change in assessment and this led us to 'authentic' assessment (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999) and the use of portfolio (Wolf, 1994). We decided to use portfolio because of its potential for exploration of the opera process as well as identity and curriculum. It would also allow a place for individual expression alongside the collaborative opera site.

Throughout the development of the opera, each student constructed their own portfolios that articulated the development of their professional stances on curriculum and assessment.

In critiquing our teaching and learning practice in 2002, we used four stages of action research outlined by Arthur, Gordon and Butterfield (2003):

1. pondering
2. planning
3. putting in a strategy
4. pulling back to refine your initiative (p. 212)

as a theoretical framework. In 2003 we developed a more reflexive (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998) teaching approach and in so doing distanced this project from action research. Some methodological considerations and implications regarding this shift are taken up later in this paper.

During the making of the opera the students 'imagined' curriculum. In their curriculum 'imagining', the operatic chorus critiqued current mandated and outcomes-based programs and constraints. The operatic dancers worked through curriculum tensions as they juxtaposed contemporary dance with haka[1] and ballet. They 'reconceptualize[d] the nature of curriculum to see it not in terms of plans preset or ideologies advocated, but as an image hovering over the process of education' (Doll & Gough, 2002).

In November 2003, our seventy students publicly performed their opera and completed their portfolios, which included such forms as written pieces, CD Roms, photographic narratives, models, art pieces and paintings. For example, one student, Gisela, reported that:

> Working in the opera has given us the chance to begin to express our identities as teachers by establishing where we stand as curriculum creators and assessors. Much of this awareness has also come from the way the Opera itself reflects Curriculum and Assessment through the arguments, suggestions, knock backs, and successes. It is these understandings that we hope will profoundly colour the stance we take with our students in the future (Gisela, 2003).

We now move from the libretto to the three arias.

## Teaching and Learning 'Through' Opera

> '[a]n ethnographic opera where voices argued, disrupted, and pleaded with one another; where the high drama of misunderstandings, deceit, and the conflicting desires made present and absent through language and through practice confound

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[1] Based on Maori ceremonial posture dance with vocal accompaniments

what is typically taken as the familiar story of learning to teach' (Britzman, 2003, p. 247).

Although Britzman was writing of her own experience in writing an ethnography of student teacher experience, the tensions and dynamics of operatic voices are evocative of the sounds of our opera. In this process we, the students and the teachers, were engaged in exciting and confrontational risk taking. The ownership of their learning was established from the outset as the students actively chose to join this class. They knew they would be 'doing' this subject through making an opera. Many of the students knew us, the teachers, through previous classes. Mureli commented, 'I hate opera. But I want to do it because I trust you - so I will come.'   Other students did not know us personally but had heard that this class was going to create an opera, and so they came.  The numbers for the class grew to fifty students. By the second week, other students had heard about the class and its singing, dancing, writing, arguing, acting and authentic collaborative work and then there were seventy students.

> Finishing assignments and assessments at the end of the first semester, the prospect of presenting an opera next time, rather than another bloody essay, seemed idyllic. I decided "Why not?" and signed up (Antoinette, 2003).

**We had a group of students who had chosen to be part of this learning process – the stage was already set for student-centred learning.**

Students knew they were not going to learn *about* the subject and then at the end create a presentation of their learnings in the form of an opera. It was clearly not an exhibition (Sizer, 1992, 1996) in that sense. The students were confronted in a way they had not previously experienced. They had heard of the process of 'learning through' (Gardner,

1995) and of meaningful learning and authentic learning. They had heard of, and even advocated, a student-centred approach. Their workshop time was, from the outset, devoted to creating the opera. They were responsible for both creating this opera *and* for constructing their understandings of curriculum and assessment through that process of creation. Initially, this was a source of concern for some students.  For example, Justin wrote:

> I have reservations that this will disintegrate into a big 'love-in' that loses its way and does not keep focus on our as yet unidentified goals. I am also wary of people hijacking the class and dominating it with their personality. Apart from that I am excited by the scope that we have and by what might happen, lasting outcomes are more likely from this approach (2003).

They were worried that they wouldn't know enough about the content as if the content of curriculum and assessment existed in a bounded document or place. We knew from our previous experience of opera making (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon et al., 2003) that they would be involved in serious, reflective and highly analytical thinking about curriculum. We knew that, through a collaborative process involving music, movement, and writing, they would engage with and critically interrogate central issues of curriculum and assessment.

> Opera has offered us the scope to express our thoughts into performance and allowed us to whisper our fears. As the Opera evolved a series of vignettes began to take shape, each with its own voice; each exploring a different aspect of the Curriculum and Assessment landscape (Gisella, 2003).

As they committed themselves to the opera, each student (even those who had initially declared they wanted a backstage role) positioned themselves on the stage. In doing this they questioned, created and imagined themselves as curriculum makers – not just program implementers.  They saw curriculum as a creative process rather than the technical implementation of programs devised by others. They seemed to recognise that it

was the expression of their professional identities as teachers that they were singing and dancing. Mureli traces this process:

> Why do I have to do this? What's this got to do with teaching anyway?
> I can't dance! I can't sing! Look at all of them getting into it! What can I offer?
> We were planning a curriculum! Transformation! I was so nervous!
> Coming together! So much work has been put in by all of us. I have come such a long way. I have learnt by doing, by doing I have understood, and by that I have become … A TEACHER (Mureli, 2003).

They were also 'writing' their portfolios at the same time as they were creating the opera. These took a multiplicity of forms. And the 'writing' was important work in terms of identity transformation (White, 2004) and curriculum understanding. In her seminal work, 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry,' Laurel Richardson (2000) explains: 'Although we usually think about writing as a mode of "telling" about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis' (p. 499). Further, an interesting connection between identity and writing is that the *process* of writing (or in this particular instance, creating and making as well) itself can help gather and order thoughts and can be a time of contemplation and illumination. Ely, Vinz et al (1997) comment that 'We often marvel at how understanding is informed through writing' (p. 14). Further, writing seems to have a transformative quality. It has the power to change people and as bell hooks (1994) commented, 'Focusing on experience allows them to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak' (p. 21). As mentioned earlier, other forms were included as well as writing, but the essential focus was on making the internal world explicit. This is aligned closely with autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) 'whereby the researcher's own experience [becomes] a topic of investigation in its own right' (p. 733).

For our students, the collaborative, creative and authentic process had profoundly

engaged them both professionally and personally.

> My dealing with people, their lives, and the process we went through and the
> endless questioning of worth, quality and meaning will forever affect my teaching.
> It weaved curriculum, assessment and teachers work into a coherent whole much
> more than I will ever be able to. It was the success of many working towards a
> shared goal with a thousand different visions. The process of working with people,
> text, ego, time, pressure, joy, sadness is what made it rich. The learning was
> something that happened subtly while you tried to explain to someone that it
> would be ok, or to trust the process when you yourself were not so sure (Matt,
> 2003).

### *Knowledge, Identity and Portfolio*

We 'noticed' (Mason, 2002; Moss et al., 2004) that in developing curriculum knowledge

and 'creating' curriculum understandings through the opera and subsequent portfolio, our

students focused very much on identity and transformation during the process. Connelly

and Clandinin (1999) also commented that, after talking with many experienced teachers

about knowledge, the issue of identity emerged as being paramount:

> We noticed that teachers seemed to be trying to answer different questions [from
> knowledge-related ones].  Their questions were ones of identity.  They were
> questions of "Who am I in my story of teaching?"; "Who am I in my place at the
> school?"; "Who am I in children's stories?"; "Who am I in my administrator's
> stories?"' "Who am I in parents' stories?" and so on.  We began to listen more
> closely.  What we heard intrigued us.  In graduate student writing, in teacher
> inquiry groups, and in research meetings, teachers were more inclined to ask
> questions along the lines of "Who am I in this situation?" then "What do I know
> in this situation?"  Teachers seemed more concerned to ask questions of who they
> are than of what they know (p. 3).

We saw the portfolio as an opportunity to engage with significant curriculum ideas and

the self.  Using portfolios with pre-service teachers is not a new idea (Loughran &

Corrigan, 1995; Lyons, 1998; McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996; Reid & Frid, 2001).  While the

portfolio is drawn originally from the arts (Wolf, 1994), where it is used to exhibit one's

technique and skill, in our context a portfolio draws on narrative theory. Our aim in using portfolio was to encourage:

- the exploration of identity

- reflection on involvement in the opera process

- interaction between knowledge about curriculum and the self

- the articulation of personal philosophy including beliefs and values.

We encouraged the students to use a range of forms for this expression and were surprised at the extraordinary portfolios they submitted. We felt that we could not assess the individual performance and contribution of students through the performance alone. Nor could we assess the performance as a collaborative effort. There were many 'supernumeraries'[2] or 'spear carriers' onstage, but the development of the opera vignettes was collaborative and inclusive. The individual portfolios allowed us to assess individual students through their own voices.

We were mindful of Deborah Britzman's (2003) view that teaching involves 'coming to terms with one's intentions and values, as well as one's views of knowing, being, and acting in a setting characterized by contradictory realities, negotiation, and dependency and struggle' (p. 31). She also explains that 'Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become (p.31). The 'private' aspects of pedagogy Britzman describes as:

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[2] A supernumerary is a person on the opera stage who performs a non-singing, non-speaking role that are used to fill in crowd scenes (Fielding, 2002)

[C]oping with competing definitions of success and failure, and one's own sense of vulnerability and credibility. Residing in the "heads" and "hearts" of teachers, and emerging from their personal and institutional biography, this "personal practical knowledge," or knowledge made from the stuff of lived experience, is so intimately a part of teachers' enactments that its appearance as skills becomes taken for granted (p. 28).

She also talks of the importance of voice in becoming a teacher and comments that 'The struggle for voice is a conflict between old and new events, and what will be discarded and what will remain as the self becomes something other than itself. The struggle for voice is a struggle for narrative, not authenticity or adaptation into a pre-existing identity (p. 22).

We have not yet reached the finale of this project about student and teacher learning is and the curtain has not yet fallen. Our 2003 students are currently curriculum creators and implementers in schools. We are intrigued by the ways the curriculum opera experience is echoed in the students' transformative portfolio work. A large cohort of these students has agreed to attend a weekend later this year where they will share their experiences as graduates. They will also meet with 2004 opera students and will create an aria to contribute to the next opera – perhaps the ghost of curriculum past? Ethnography has informed how we are teaching and how we are researching. This process is transformative for both us as researchers and for our students.

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