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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of autoethnography as an instructional tool in introductory research courses. Since many students fear research courses in graduate education programs, many of them build up paralyzing anxieties that prevent them from completing the courses and/or their programs. To address this , I propose the use of autoethnography as an instructional tool. This form of inquiry will be useful by allowing students to (a) explore how personal experiences influence their research (e.g., subjectivity, assumptions), (b ) identify gaps in the mainstream literature (e.g., is this story being told?), (c ) use various data collection strategies in a non - threatening research project (e.g., document analysis , journals, interviews), and (d ) write up narrative findings.

## Keywords

Autoethnography, Instructional Tools, Subjectivity

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*This paper focuses on the use of autoethnography as an instructional tool in introductory research courses. Since many students fear research courses in graduate education programs, many of them build up paralyzing anxieties that prevent them from completing the courses and/or their programs. To address this, I propose the use of autoethnography as an instructional tool. This form of inquiry will be useful by allowing students to (a) explore how personal experiences influence their research (e.g., subjectivity, assumptions), (b) identify gaps in the mainstream literature (e.g., is this story being told?), (c) use various data collection strategies in a non-threatening research project (e.g., document analysis, journals, interviews), and (d) write up narrative findings. Keywords: Autoethnography, Instructional Tools, Subjectivity*

Research methods courses are an essential component of many graduate programs in the colleges of education across the nation. Based on the Germanic model, a number of graduate programs "focus on…the idea of a functional unity between teaching and research, with learning occurring as a by-product of collaborative research which produce[s] new knowledge in the quest for both theory and objective truth" (Heyman, 1999, p. 2). This is usually done by completing a thesis or a dissertation (Burton & Steane, 2004; Heyman, 1999). There is also coursework associated with the preparation of this endeavor which varies per degree program (Burton & Steane, 2004; Dufour, 2004). Although these courses are an integral part of the degree programs, they tend to present many challenges for students enrolled in them (Cooper, Chenail, & Fleming, 2012; Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012; Diab, 2006; Hubbell, 1994) and for faculty members teaching them (Hubbell, 1994; Tan & Ko, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: to explore the challenges that graduate students have encountered in research methods courses and to discuss the possibility of instructors using autoethnography as a means of overcoming these challenges. I was motivated to write this article because of my experience teaching several research methods courses within an Educational Leadership program along with my experience of using autoethnography in exploring my experience as a new faculty member. After presenting background literature related to teaching research methods and strategies employed to teach research methods, I will provide a synthesis of autoethnography as an emerging inquiry method; and additionally, suggest implications for its instructional utilization.

## Background

### Challenges to Teaching Research Methods Courses

Over the last couple of years, I have taught several introductory research courses: writing a literature review, conducting qualitative research, conducting survey research, and introduction to research methods. I have also taught research application courses that assisted students with their pilot study leading to their dissertation, as well as having served on several dissertation committees. My most influential experiences come from the Educational Leadership Program that I was affiliated with had what was called an *embedded dissertation*,

whereby if students planned their topics carefully, they could explore the same topic in all of their classes as they matriculated through the program and build upon their understanding of the phenomena in a scaffolding manner. So, by the end of the coursework, students would have a well-defined skeleton for a dissertation proposal. Although several students began the program with a sustainable, well-articulated research topic, other students were not able to do so. The challenges that these students faced often led to indecisiveness that ultimately delayed the dissertation proposal and writing process, thus, delaying completion and graduation. Students were able to complete course assignments but were unable to pull all the papers together to get a cohesive dissertation process. Delays such as these in the dissertation process could have dire consequences for graduate programs' completion rates which could impact standing within their institution as well as accreditation bodies. Thus, it is imperative that graduate programs become proactive in assisting students in overcoming the many challenges that research method courses tend to pose.

In turning to the literature to better understand the issues students encountered in such courses, it became apparent that there were multiple layers to this issue. Although a majority of the literature related to teaching research methods was related to the undergraduate experience (e.g., Hubbell, 1994; Tan & Ko, 2004), the literature was consistent with my experiences as a research methods instructor and, therefore, applicable when working with graduate students (Cooper, Chenail et al., 2012; Cooper, Fleischer et al., 2012). Research (Diab, 2006; Hubbell, 1994) has found that students feel as though the research courses are not connected to their interests. Additionally, students were unfamiliar with the various research methods and data collection processes (Cooper, Fleischer et al., 2012; Diab, 2006; Hubbell, 1994; Picciotto, 1997; Tan & Ko, 2004) and experienced great angst related to taking research courses (Hubbell, 1994; Maier & Curtin, 2005). However, one of the more serious challenges I have encountered not widely addressed in the literature is the students' struggle to select sustainable research topics (i.e., difference between a problem and a research problem; Glesne, 2006).

For example, students may feel very passionately about a procedure and/or policy instituted within their organization and may want to conduct research related to that particular issue. However, they may be unclear about whether or not there is a contextual foundation for the problem and if the problem exists beyond their viewpoint. Sometimes, they have opted to simply document procedures and/or actions that they have taken without fully understanding implications of research. More importantly, they may become entangled in resolving their own concerns and do not realize that the issue has no impact on others. Simply stated, sometimes they seek to "grind an ax" as opposed to tackling a true sustainable research topic that has implications for research, policy, and practice. Understandably, when students were informed that they needed to rethink their research problem, they oftentimes became visibly frustrated with the entire process. To that end, when asked what they liked least about the research courses that I taught, there was a consensus among the students that questioned why they needed to take research courses since they were interested in administration, not research. One student noted on the course evaluation that "I do not see how this course contributes to my understanding of leadership or my being able to obtain an administrative position, no offense." Another student noted, "it is a lot of work to say that I will not do research when I complete the program." These concerns are widely acknowledged by instructors of research methods courses (Cooper, Chenail et al., 2012; Cooper, Fleischer et al., 2012), yet it appears that we have simply accepted them as "coming with the territory." But, does it have to be that way?

**Teaching Strategies Employed in Research Methods Courses**

In understanding the challenges that students face, I suggest it is imperative that faculty begin to think more creatively in order to assist students in overcoming these obstacles. An increasing amount of research is beginning to address the issues of teaching research methods courses (e.g., Cooper, Chenail et al., 2012; Hubbell, 1994; Lowry, 1992; Potter, Caffrey, & Plante, 2003). In preparing for my research courses, I used syllabi from my graduate program, from colleagues within the department, and from exploratory internet searches. Adding to that, I employed activities from various sources. One activity that I, like many of my colleagues, employed was the traditional biographical sketch which usually sought to understand the students' interest in a particular topic and the students' writing level. I found that it was a great tool to assist me in understanding students' motivation, subjectivity awareness, and writing readiness; however, I believed it did little to really help the students in understanding how to select a topic. By simply writing "good job" and returning it to the students without helping them understand the importance of the assignment, I found that students were missing an integral piece in understanding the difference between a problem and a sustainable research problem (Glesne, 2006).

Another error that I made related to instructional design was to lecture. I believed that I needed to interpret the text for students and then, they, in turn, would be able to apply the concepts. Although there was some discussion among the students and myself, students often left with more questions than they arrived with as they appeared to be perplexed by the many different perspectives one research study could encapsulate. Although I believed the traditional research activity assignments (e.g., conducting literature search, write article critique, conduct a small scale study, etc…) would assist students in moving through these issues, additional issues related to *self* and the research topic often reoccurred. For example, one student was disappointed with a particular program that she was asked to implement within her classroom. She believed that it detracted from "real" classroom instruction and was not very effective in addressing the students' needs. So, when conducting observations and interviewing participants, she focused on aspects of the program that she found ineffective and found support via observations and interviews to support her notions. Because she had become consumed by her disdain for the program, she was unable to articulate the research problem and/or realize how her experiences and self colored her data collection processes and findings. Yet, this experience was meaningful for her because it allowed her to move through a complete cycle of research, allowed her to see how she may need to broaden her research interests, how to collect multiple data for triangulation (including more "objective" measures of attitudes and experiences), as well as critique the research methods employed. Two semesters later, she was able to broaden her topic and write an excellent dissertation.

Since that time, I have found a number of articles that have explored various instructional strategies for teaching research methods courses (e.g., Cooper, Chenail et al., 2012; Hubbell, 1994; Lowry, 1992; Potter, Caffrey, & Plante, 2003). In a meta-data-analysis related to qualitative students' experiences (Cooper, Chenail et al., 2012), the authors found that students could be greatly enhanced by discovery-oriented experiences. This can be achieved by various instructional strategies: using feature films to hone observation skills (Tan & Ko, 2004), conducting institutional research as a means of using various research strategies (Picciotto, 1997), and having students create poster sessions to help present research (Lowry, 1992). Additionally, other methods include maintaining a journal to monitor thought processes (Hubbell, 1994), integrating service learning into research methods courses (Potter, Caffrey, & Plante, 2003), and assigning a real-world, group project (Ransford & Butler, 1982). Another strategy discussed was the use of heterodoxy as a means of conducting more humanistic research (Hubbell, 1994). Hubbell argues that because social science research does

not fit the traditional tenets of scientific research, it is imperative that instructors allow students to explore more interpretive and humanistic research methods. He argues that by exposing students to new ways of approaching research, students are likely to become more creative, seek alternative perspectives, and are able to explore assumptions in a meaningful way. Adding to that, it is important to help students to see the connections (Cooper, Fleisher et al., 2012).  The authors argue that students make connections to the participants, previous knowledge, and the learning process while engaged in qualitative research. With the various assignments that can be employed to engage students in the research process, research methods instructors have more tools in their repertoire than ever before in history.

Because I envision research methods courses as an integral part of graduate studies, I continue to seek meaningful ways to engage students in the process. Many students focus on the amount of time required of the course and are not always able to make connections to the relevance of the research courses. Additionally, students tend to become frustrated with the research process and are unclear about research methods available and how to go about collecting data consistent with various research methodologies. More importantly, I find that students struggle with selecting a *sustainable* research problem. A sustainable research problem calls for a systematic study of a phenomenon for which results of the study will be meaningful to others and not just the researcher (Glesne, 2006). Although a number of innovative instructional strategies have been explored to engage students in the research process (e.g., Booth, 1984; Hubbell, 1994), few have really discussed helping students make meaningful connections to the research. Adding to that, few (e.g., Hubbell, 1994) have challenged the empiricist methods as the only true means of teaching research methods, thus, providing promise for more alternative forms of inquiry, especially for students seeking non-research opportunities upon program completion.

## What about Autoethnography?

As I contemplated how I might address the many challenges of teaching research methods courses and the various strategies employed to address those issues, I became increasingly interested in how the use of autoethnography may speak to the varied concerns. Prior to beginning my teaching career, I was asked if I would be interested in writing an authoethnography about my experiences as a new faculty member in transition. As a new faculty member, I was eager to accept a publishing opportunity. Although I had written manuscripts related to faculty issues, I was unfamiliar with this form of qualitative inquiry. What is it? Is it an acceptable form of research in my discipline? And what makes "me" special?  In telling my story, I found that many of my issues were consistent with the literature. However, I found substantial voids in the literature as it related to faculty voice. Adding to that, it was a therapeutic process that allowed me to explore my assumptions and biases, and having to think about how I wanted to tell my story, I believe that I am better able to tell others' stories. The use of autoethnography has made me a better researcher.

An authoethnography is an emergent form of qualitative research inquiry that asks the primary question: "How does my own experience of this culture connect with and offer insights about this culture, situation, event, and/or way of life?" (Patton, 2002, p. 84). According to Glense (2006), "the autoethnography begins with the self, the personal biography. Using narratives of the self, the researcher goes on to say something about the larger cultural setting" (p. 199). Increasingly, researchers (e.g., Smith, 2005; Wall, 2006) see a need to better incorporate self into research as a means of exploring sociocultural issues, as well as relieve the researchers from having to speak for others, because *self* is the source of data.

Despite the fact that *self* is the source of data, it is important to maintain rigorous methods of data collection and analysis (Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2003). The ethnographic aspect of the study should be grounded in authentic research. Data may include correspondences, journals, pictures, questionnaires, test results, and other important data (Duncan, 2004; Patton, 2002; Wall, 2006). Data should also be organized, coded, and analyzed in systematic way; however, it is relayed most often in a narrative format (Patton, 2002), thus illuminating the storytelling process. The use of narrative analysis will allow stories to stand alone as a worthy documentary of experience that could be analyzed for connections between cultural and social patterns, thus, providing insight into the cultural meaning and social significance of a particular event. Smith (2005) adds that autoethnography is beneficial in exploring subjectivity and writing reflectively and introspectively about a subject that is close to the heart.

While autoethnography allows students to be creative in telling their story, criteria for maintaining high standards in collection and analyses include the following questions (Richardson, 2000, as cited in Patton, 2002): does this piece make a substantive contribution to social science perspectives? Does it have aesthetic merit? Is their enough data for the reader to make judgments about the researchers self awareness and/or point of view? What impact does this piece have on the reader? And does it express the lived experience?

Adding to that, autoethnographies have been used extensively in the social and health sciences to better shed light on unique cases (e.g., Foster, McAllister, & O'Brien, 2005; Muncey, 2005; Neville-Jan, 2004; Vidal-Ortiz, 2004), as well as to chronicle faculty life (e.g., Lang, 2005). Vidal-Ortiz (2004) used autoethnography to discuss Puerto Rican identity development, especially from the perspective of being a White Person of Color, while Muncey (2005) used autoethnography to explore teenage pregnancy within a health studies program from both a teen parent and a nurse's perspective. Lang (2005) chronicled his first year as a faculty member in the English Department at a Liberal Arts institution as he struggled with creating a healthy balance between professional and academic life as well as grading and other teaching aspects. The aforementioned studies not only provided insight into the lives of these individuals but also identified voids in the literature and posed sustainable future research topics.

## Implications for Teaching

Clearly, autoethnography is a form of inquiry that could introduce students to research methods in an engaging and beneficial manner. In employing an autoethnography as a means of assisting graduate students in exploring a research topic, telling their story, students will be able to do the following: (a) explore how personal experiences influence their research (e.g., subjectivity, assumptions), (b) identify gaps in the mainstream literature (e.g., is this story being told?), (c) use various data collection strategies in a non-threatening research project (e.g., document analysis, journals, interviews), and (d) write up narrative findings.

First, as researchers, all of us bring assumptions and biases to our research. Although quantitative researchers, for many years, espoused that their research was objective, we have since learned otherwise (Glesne, 2006). Because it is likely that all of us will find a little of ourselves in our research, the use of autoethnography will allow students to fully explore their interactions with the culture and/or phenomena that they wish to explore. In systematically examining their experiences, students are likely to be able to identify biases early on in the research process and develop strategies that will allow them to manage their assumptions in a meaningful way (Smith, 2005).

Second, in assisting students in exploring themselves as a part of the culture and/or phenomena, students will be able to draw connections to the existing literature. More

importantly, students will be able to identify the voids that may exist in the literature based on their experiences, which is usually the impetus for most research interests. Although this type of research has drawn negative attention in that it appears that the researcher has an axe to grind or too literary (Patton, 2002), it could also become a catalyst in allowing students to better understand their experiences are consistent or inconsistent with literature. By understanding their experiences within a theoretical context, students may be able to make an informed decision as to how to proceed from that moment forward.

Third, autoethnography allows students to collect various types of data in a non-threatening situation. An autoethnography may allow for flexibility in research methods not consistent with rigid methods of the empiricist tradition that often paralyzes students (Hubbell, 1994). For example, students may collect both qualitative and quantitative data from various sources, many times, those that they are quite familiar with (e.g., personal documents, data that they possess related to the topic, literature, etc….). Teaching opportunities may arise in helping students to identify the type of data and understand how the data may inform their study. Additionally, students will be introduced to ethical issues related to the use of seemingly innocent data: did they ask for permission to use data especially if their family, friends, and/or colleagues' information is included? What data are not being explored? And why not?  Because students are studying themselves within a culture or a phenomena, they may be more likely to dig deeper and be creative in seeking various data sources as they move to place the research problem within a larger context.

Lastly, autoethnography is helpful in assisting students to write in a narrative format. Writing can be a very therapeutic process as well as a frustrating experience. Therefore, helping students to write about themselves in meaningful way may reduce the anxiety of writing research reports. For some students, writing in a narrative format comes easily; however, they become intimidated by the empiricist research process that often stifles their ability to write cohesively trying to fit a particular mode. Other students may be comfortable with the research process and have difficulties writing up the findings (i.e., telling the story); they have good, solid data but are unable to articulate what it all means. Consequently, the narrative analysis associated with autoethnography lends itself perfectly to addressing these issues. As students move between themselves and the larger social/cultural issues, students will not only have an opportunity to transition to the new demands of scholarly writing but also will be able to see if their selected topic is a sustainable—answering the "so what?" question.

As stated by Cooper, Chenail et al. (2012), students are more receptive to theoretical aspects of learning once they have gained confidence in their skills as a researcher.  Because of the insight students glean from conducting an autoethnography, this emergent form of research is an ideal instructional tool. The autoethnography may be used as an introductory exercise or a semester-long project. This type of inquiry may be employed in various introductory research courses, such as graduate studies, research literature analysis, and methods. Additionally, this form of inquiry may be used in an advanced research methods courses, such as advanced methods, independent studies, and doctoral seminars. For example, students interested in understanding persistence of college students may conduct an autoethnography exploring his/her college experiences. Or a student interested in literacy programs may explore his/her experiences learning to read and/or teaching students how to read. These students could conduct literature searches related to the topic to see how his/her experiences are consistent or inconsistent with current literature and/or will be able to determine if the topic is too personal. If the topic is not too personal and is worthy of further exploration, students may conduct a small scale study regarding the topic. This will allow the student to determine if the topic is too narrow or too broad, thus, adding another level of legitimacy for further exploration. By better understanding who they are, it is likely that

students will be better positioned to take risk in exploring research topics as they see themselves in the process and are able to make more meaningful connections.

## Conclusion

I propose it is imperative that we allow researchers to tell their story in order that they may become better researchers. It allows students to systematically explore themselves within a culture and/or phenomena that may yield meaningful results so that they may make connections to the research process. As research methods instructors, we need to allow students to tell their story. Why not? There is much to be gained by allowing students to have this experience. As students reflect on their personal experiences related the culture and/or phenomena, they may become more invested in the process and better able to understand how to select a sustainable research topic. In having a suitable research topic, students may be more willing to move forward into the dissertation and/or thesis process as they will better understand the research problem and/or how they are connected to this issue.

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