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Engaging the Craftsmanship of Autoethnography

To engage living and working with autoethnography practice the following are a few pragmatic suggestions. I discuss four elements of autoethnography practice: reading, writing, storytelling, and artmaking. These elements are not exhaustive, but allude to the expansive and diverse nature of autoethnography.

Reading

A Caveat: Read widely. The process of autoethnography is not strictly academic. A caveat of many great writers, regardless of background, is to read extensively from diverse sources: for example, science fiction, historical documents, newspapers, photographic essays with text, disciplinary works outside our own etc. If you do not already do this, a trip to a well-stocked bookstore will expose you to an astounding array - in neatly categorized sections, for example Victoria's Russell Books. It is through reading one can develop their own style: immersing oneself in words and witnessing language in textual action. Further, we encounter ideas we would not have otherwise and with discretion, this can lead to unique contributions to our field.

As a Catalyst: Readings that inspires us can also serve as a catalyst for writing. For example, I connect with the poetry of Mary Oliver, John O'Donohue and Jan Zwicky. Reading such poetry for even a few minutes can lead me to be re-energized and re-calibrated – ready to write more. I sometimes use brief non-academic related readings as a catalyst for timed free writing practice.

Tips for Making Time: Try audio books you can play on the go (including in your car) or portable digital book reading devices (eg: Kindle).

Writing

Enroll in a Few Writing Classes (Especially in Creative Writing)

Your local college or university likely has a continuing education department where writing courses are on offer. These are likely over a short time period and affordable. Writing is like many of the arts, practice is essential and practice with others can keep us going.

The program at SFU is particularly good; it has one-day workshops and some distance offerings:

http://www.sfu.ca/continuing-studies/programs-and-courses/area-of-study/writing-communications.html?utm_source=various&utm_medium=various&utm_campaign=wp

There are also many writing courses offered on the Internet. However, ones from sought-after and respected institutions can be expensive, have long waiting lists and even in some cases require writing portfolios. Some others are from non-credible sources. If unsure, consult with a writing instructor or mentor that you trust.

Finally, consider attending a local writing festival, poetry reading, or any other forum where you get to hear from writers demonstrating and discussing craft. The Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival is an engaging example.

Writing Practice Books with Generative Exercises

Warning: most books marketed, as “how-to” on writing are misleading and counter-productive.

More helpful might be books that offer practical guidance with a few exercises for practice. The texts I list here come from contemplative-informed writing practice, offering the dual function of establishing writing practice and connecting us with inner resources for both sparking imagination and diffusing stress.

Within general writing circles, Natalie Goldberg’s work is considered “classic.”

Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within. Natalie Goldberg

Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life. Natalie Goldberg

Also: Old Friend from Far Away: The Practice of Writing Memoir. Natalie Goldberg. [a caution with this one: autoethnography is not memoir, having a different intent, but these exercises can be a catalyst towards auto-e.]

There is also Herring’s newer work.

Writing Begins with the Breath: Embodying Your Authentic Voice. Laraine Herring

Developing a Writing Practice

Pragmatic Academic Advice: How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Writing. Paul J. Silvia.

Pragmatic Creative Writing Advice: The Writing Life. Annie Dillard.

Also, part of autoethnography is noticing details of life. A suggestion: try to notice everyday moments of Beauty that surprise you (eg: a rose still in bloom at the beginning of December) ; little details that are unusual (eg: a zipper pull on a jacket in the shape of an anchor) and other exceptions that pull you out of your thoughts and into other frames of mind.

Storytelling

Autoethnography, whether as a methodology or a self-reflexive practice in qualitative inquiry, is a renewal of storytelling practice. Storytelling is not just for children, being an ancient human practice that requires skill and practice. The elements of “story” and

“storytelling” are useful to keep in mind when developing autoethnographic writing practice. For example, they are a reminder that our work is connected with an audience, whether immediately present or at a distance; also that our creative process and outcome is a form of performance.

Lewis, P. J. (2006). Stories I live by. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(5), 829-849.

Artmaking

Autoethnography is an invitation to blur the assumed boundary between arts and science. The “imagination” becomes a potent analytical tool, coming to the foreground. The problem with this can be intimidating thoughts such as “wait a minute I am not creative!” or perhaps, “wow, I want to do this, just how many ways are there?”

In response, here are a couple readings to assist thinking about the creative process and bringing arts into your work.

Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking. David Bayles & Ted Orland.

Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research. Sage Publications.

A final comment on craftsmanship and autoethnography, doing autoethnographic work is highly individual and it is about finding your own process. This document is a means to deepen your understanding and involvement with your practice. The next steps you take beyond this document are more important still; steps of an ongoing practice.