

229 The Dynamics of Detach and Connect when using Autobiographies in Professional Education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The paper reports on preliminary findings from a case study of an autobiography-based course element included in the social work professional education program of a Swedish university. In the studied course element, the aim was for autobiographies to provide a platform and catalyst for student reflections on client perspectives as well as for reflexivity in relation to students' own frames of reference. The paper seeks to investigate how students engaged with autobiographies in relation to their conceptualizations of the future profession and how their engagement was shaped by the didactic context. Preliminarily, it is found that student displays of empathetic and personal connection and analytical detachment are informed by their conceptualizations of their future professional role. Furthermore, these patterns of connection and detachment appear to be significantly impacted by prompts and input that students receive from the didactic context, including teacher guidance and the social dynamics of the learning environment.

Full paper

As Satchwell (2019) points out, "stories are a tried and trusted means of learning and understanding. This includes learning not only about other people, places and events, but also learning about oneself" (p. 54). The dual pedagogical potential of story that Satchwell refers to has captured the interest of educators and scholars in different professional education (PE) domains, and several arguments for using story – a wide category that comprises autobiographical and biographical narratives as well as various forms of narrative fiction – in PE have been brought forth (cf. e.g. Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019; Bernhardsson, Lundin & Stenbeck, 2021). Existing research is dominated by studies in which educators conduct research in their own teaching-context. This body of work provides insight into the assumptions and intentions behind such pedagogical initiatives, as well as the students' learning outcomes. However, how different factors shape student engagement with story have received less attention, despite the circumstance that what a student will learn through the reading of a story is determined not only by the characteristics of text and reader, but also by how the reading is contextualized, prompted, guided, and processed in the PE context. It follows that the development of further knowledge is needed in these regards, since it is key to understanding *how stories function as pedagogical tools for learning* (or not).

The case study presented in this paper seeks to contribute to the scientific discussion of the pedagogical role of story in PE by investigating: (i) how students engage with story in relation to their conceptualizations of the future profession, and (ii) how their engagement is shaped by the didactic context (i.e. the understandings of professional knowledge and professionalism that teachers on the course convey in their communication with students, the learning activities that the students engage in and interact through, and the scaffolding provided for those learning activities by teaching staff). In the studied case, the type of story employed is autobiography, and the PE context is located within the social work PE program of a large research-intensive university in Sweden. The autobiography course element was introduced with a two-fold intent, as stated by the head teacher: to provide the students with a platform and catalyst for A) reflections on client perspectives and B) reflexivity in relation to the students' own frame of reference. The element was comprised of the reading of an autobiography selected by the student from a list of options, the writing of an individual reflection paper, and a seminar in which participants' papers were discussed in a group of approximately 6 students with the aid of a facilitator. Data collection included student papers and recorded seminar discussions in three groups, and interviews with five students and four facilitators after the completion of the course element. Two of the interviewed facilitators were also teaching/leading the course. In addition to this, supplementary data were collected from other elements of the course to support the researcher's understanding of the overall context.

The study is currently at the stage of data analysis. Documents, transcripts, and field-notes are undergoing a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) driven by the two foci stated above. Preliminarily, the analytical concepts of *detachment* and *connection* are emerging as important both vis-a-vis how students engage with story in relation to their conceptualizations of the future profession and how their engagement is shaped by the didactic context. *Detachment* occurs in relation to the “subjective personal space of emotions and experiences” (Kramsch, 2000, as cited in Matos, 2004, p. 169) of the student, through empathetic engagement with the narrated experience of another, or through reflexive reasoning that requires a degree of analytical distancing. It also occurs in relation to the narrated experience of another through the application of theoretical frameworks. *Connection*, on the other hand, is at work in the students’ empathetic engagement with the narrated experience of another, as they strive to understand the narrator’s vantagepoint and its implications. Moreover, it is a crucial component of reflexivity, in that students recognize how cognitive and affective dimensions interconnect in their thinking and attitudes, and how those constellations in turn connect to their identity and experience. Preliminary findings suggest that links exist between student conceptualizations of their future professional role and their modes of detaching and connecting in the studied course element. It is also found that patterns of connection and detachment are significantly impacted by prompts and input that students receive from the didactic context, including teacher guidance and the social dynamics of the seminar group.

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