

Teaching as Response, Responsibility, and Response-ability

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Abstract

In this paper we – two teacher educators – give voice and effect a response to some of “*what challenges, irritates or even disturbs*” (Biesta 2006, p.259) in our work in higher education. In responding we take up the ethical opportunity signalled in Bengtson and Barnett (2017) to reflect anew on the potentials and pitfalls of higher education teaching and learning practices, here addressing the practice of educational autobiography writing in teacher education. This practice, which typically entails inviting students to reflect on their personal educational histories, is commonly used in initial teacher education programmes on the grounds that it can foster student teachers’ awareness of how past experiences can continue to exercise an influence in the present. We reflect on the use of an exercise in ‘brief’ or ‘snapshot’ educational autobiography on an initial teacher education programme for further education, on our responsibility and respons-ability (Oliver 2001) in using the exercise, and on the possibilities that it provides for an ‘emotional education’ (Crawford 2005), which might explicitly attend to the affective domain and the psycho-dynamics of the teaching and learning encounter.

Keywords

Affective Domain, Curriculum, Educational Autobiography, Emotional Education, Ethics, Further Education, Teacher Education

Teachers' knowledge about teaching derives from their own experiences as students in particular historical and material contexts... it was autobiographical reflection that helped me turn the lessons of my life into curricular objectives (Rousmaniere 2000, pp.92-97).

1. Introduction

Written exercises in educational autobiography - exercises in which pre-service teachers reflect on past experiences in education - are commonly used in teacher education programmes having putative educational value for both the teacher educator and the student teacher. For the teacher educator it is considered that such exercises can enhance awareness of the contexts from which his/her students come (Schrader 2004) and the pre-understandings that they bring to teaching and learning, and that this can inform the curriculum (Alberton Gunn et al. 2013). For the student teacher it is argued that they can foster a deeper awareness of how past experiences exercise a continuing influence on beliefs, values, motivations etc. and can provide the contexts for understanding how individual experience in education is shaped by social structures (Bushnell and Henry 2003).

In this practice paper we reflect on the introduction of an exercise in 'brief' or 'snapshot' educational autobiography at the start of an initial teacher education programme for further education. This reflection was triggered by reading Bengtsen and Bergen's (2017) paper 'Confronting the Dark Side of Higher Education'. It has been shaped by an ongoing dialogue between us two that has brought us back to the fundamental questions of 'what' and 'what for' in teaching and teacher education (Biesta 2019), to our responsibility and response-ability (Oliver 2001) as teacher educators, to the affective dimension of teaching and to the ethics of teacher education (Britzman 2000, 2007). Of course, this has also brought us back to our own educational histories and their influence on our responses to these questions, to each other, and to our students in the present, all of which underscores our reflection anew on this particular teaching and learning practice, its ethical significance and its educational potential.

2. Context

We teach on a level 9 initial teacher education programme aimed at those who wish to become teachers in Further Education and other adult learning contexts. Most of our participants on the programme are mid-career professionals who are seeking to make a professional transition to working with adult learners in Further Education and other adult learning contexts. By returning to education as an adult learner, often after several decades building a career in industry or in the civil service or after having raised a family, our students are typically making a significant life decision by coming onto the programme which, while opening up new professional horizons, is not without personal and professional risk.

Admission onto the programme involves an interview with the Programme Director in order to assess the applicant's knowledge and understanding of the sector and their motivations for wishing to undertake the programme. While the interview context is not particularly conducive to creating an open and trusting environment between applicant and interviewer, applicants often mention that they are seeking a more meaningful career when asked about their motivations for applying to the programme. Applicants sometimes make reference to challenges in their personal or family history around education as a factor in their motivation to become an adult educator. However, such personal openness at interview is understandably rare and, when asked about their motivations for becoming adult educators, the majority of applicants discuss wishing to "make a difference" or have a "meaningful impact" on others without making explicit reference to their own personal educational histories and/or motivations at this stage.

3. The Exercise

In the first semester on this programme I teach a module entitled *Strategies of Learning and Teaching* which the module descriptor describes as providing "students with a systematic understanding of various types of instructional strategies". At the start of the first workshop, I invite students to work together in small groups and use flipchart paper to write down their expectations of the module. Some of the most common answers to this question include "classroom management techniques", "learning how to use different techniques to support student learning", "use innovative teaching methods", "discover strategies to motivate learners", etc. What is clear from this exercise is that

teaching is primarily seen by student teachers as a matter of technical know-how, of learning to select the “right” teaching methods and techniques for different types of learners in order to produce the right “outcome”. Learning is thus seen as a successful outcome or output of the right input (instructional intervention or strategy).

This exercise is followed by another in which students are invited to reflect on their own history and identify a particularly meaningful moment in their educational past. In this educational autobiography, students write about a personal educational experience that had a meaningful impact on them, which may be positive or negative. These autobiographies can be deeply personal, and it is therefore not appropriate to request that students share them with their peers. If they wish, they are welcome to share their experiences with the group and a significant minority of students do so.

As students start to reflect upon and speak about their own experiences, there are typically some will describe innovative teaching techniques used by a teacher that really helped them learn. However, others will reveal particularly personal or even painful educational experiences where the intervention of a teacher had a transformative effect on them. At this point in the workshop that there is a distinctive shift in how the students speak about what constitutes good teaching in their experience. While some students refer to particular techniques that teachers used that were very effective, many students identify experiences in which they felt cared for or seen by their teacher. This is not uncommon; kindness towards students and passion for one’s subject-area emerge repeatedly in educational autobiographies as characteristic of what makes a “good teacher” (Liu 2009).

[This is echoed in Rousmaniere 2000, p.93: *“Recall a teacher who particularly affected your educational progress, whether positively or negatively. The students who draw up positive memories from this prompt tend to emphasize a teacher who was personally interactive, provided security, showed their personal side, kindness, understanding, respect, and care for children ... Some students recall a personal connection in the sense the teacher “saw something in me” and encouraged student potential by showing them how to be successful ... Rarely, however, do students mention course content, or*

the teacher's expertise as a knowledge base as the critical ingredient ... In contrast, "bad" teachers were not so much those who taught poor lessons or who did not know their subject, as those who made the classroom an anxious or fearful place"

Educational autobiography transforms understandings of what constitutes 'good teaching' and provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their own tacit motivations for wishing to become educators. In some contexts, 'difficult' or painful educational histories that are revealed in the autobiography speak to the idea of a failed empathetic response, of not having one's needs met in an educational context.

Sharing one's educational autobiography with the group is an act of courage but also of vulnerability, particularly at such an early stage in the programme when the participants do not know each other well. At the same time, the sharing of these personal stories often fosters a sense of solidarity and intimacy within the group; some students have mentioned that it was a "relief" to know that they were not alone in having negative or "shameful" educational experiences in their past. Students sometimes talk about being "not very academic" or of carrying considerable shame about what they see as their lack of attainment or feeling that they were "not good enough". Here students confront difficult educational histories, often for the first time in decades, and in doing so can sharpen their awareness of their own values and motivations for wishing to become educators in the first place.

4. Discussion

Thus far, in reflecting on this exercise in 'brief' or 'snapshot' educational autobiography we have affirmed its value in effecting an epistemological shift in our students – from concern with technique and strategy toward the affective and intersubjective dimension of teaching and learning – and for building trust amongst the group, but it is not without risk. Franzosa (1992, p.395) observes as a tendency for school experience to be portrayed in autobiographies [more generally] as "*a source of self-alienation that has to be countered in order to find an authentic voice*", and this is sometimes evident in our own and our students' accounts, which may tell of difficult experiences with emotional remainders. To the extent that these account for

the failure of the environment to meet their needs, the expectations of an empathetic response (Laub and Auerhahn 1989), we might consider them as testimony that attempts to re-invent a responsive other (Auerhahn and Laub 1990), in Wilfred Bion's terms one whom might 'contain' the difficult experience and return it in a detoxified form such that it can be thought about and learned from rather than 'acted out' (French 1997). Here we see the need to acknowledge ourselves and our students as psycho-social subjects, with experiences that have social and psychological aspects, "*reduc[ing] to neither individual (internal, intrapsychic) nor social (external, discursive, structural, interpersonal) processes*" (Hollway 2008, p.141). And we come to see the educational autobiography not alone as a context for engaging in social and political critique (Rousmaniere 2000) but also one for engaging with psycho-analytically informed ideas about emotional development and unconscious intersubjective processes. In such a manner might these difficult experiences be assimilated, made meaningful in a way that reclaims agency and contributes to educating the 'good enough' teacher who may carry this understanding into his/her relationships with students. This is how we would wish to respond to our students' accounts – in a way that open ups rather than close off possibilities.

4. Conclusions and Future Work

Reading Bengsten and Barnett (2017) brought us into dialogue about some of the emotional remainders in higher education, and while the paper signalled an ethical opportunity to reflect anew on higher education teaching and learning practices it was the exercise of brief educational autobiography that compelled us. Reflecting anew on this particular teaching and learning practice brought us further into dialogue about our own educational experiences and how these may have influenced our motivation to become teacher educators. Moreover, it brought us into dialogue about what we figure 'good enough' teaching to be and what sustains us in the face of challenges, irritations and disturbances. These include the policies and discourses that would position us as skilled strategists, whom could produce particular effects in our students (Biesta 2019), a conception of teaching that many of our students carry into the programme as expectations of us and of themselves as future educators.

Our educational experiences, which include the experiences of listening to our students' histories, have shaped our understanding of teaching and learning as primarily an affective encounter and our coming to figure ethical relation and relating as central to the educational endeavour - to ourselves, to each other (including non-human others), to knowledge, to our world. We agree with Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon (2007) that the affective domain has been relatively neglected in education and that it should attend to the development of the skills and capabilities involved in love, care and solidarity work. We see that the educational autobiography offers a context for explicit attention in teacher education to the psycho-dynamics of the teaching and learning encounter, to understanding ourselves - teachers and students - as psycho-social subjects, for exploring how inner and outer forces shape educational experience, and for learning about the ways that defences against anxiety can play out intersubjectively. It is this educational potential that we now wish to explore.

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