

The Use of Estrangement Autoethnography in Higher Education Teaching

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Abstract

This paper provides a case study of how the autoethnographic practice of estrangement was used to enhance learning in a higher education module on consumer culture. It reports on the nature of autoethnography and estrangement as learning tools that aid reflection and deeper learning. The results of the use of these methods show that by being placed in estranged positions, the reality of an everyday situation becomes clearer. Estrangement reveals the otherwise hidden normative frameworks in society such as the spaces in which consumption takes place. The estrangement activities were welcomed by the students as engaging and useful. The resulting written responses showed greater comprehension of the nature of consumer culture and a deeper level of reflection on the topic than had been previously found on the module. This paper contributes further evidence of the effectiveness of estrangement autoethnography in enhancing university student learning and provides a model for undertaking this type of activity.

Introduction

There are many ways of engaging students but few that demand such immersion in the subject as autoethnographic estrangement activities. This paper explains the motivation behind their use, describes some of the outcomes of a module which incorporated them and gives direction for future use.

Estrangement Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method which 'make[s] the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right' (Ellis & Bochner 2000 p.733). With this method, a researcher enters a situation in order to gain insight into the self and the environment. Some autoethnographers take this further and estrange themselves from the environment by doing

acts unusual to it (see for example Denzin 2003; Ellis & Brochner, 2000; Fox 2008). Acts of estrangement may, for example, include standing too closely to someone in a lift or wearing a full suit on a beach; anything that challenges the normative framework which exists in every environment. These acts may be perfectly normal in other environments thus their socially engineered nature becomes apparent. The researcher is then able to examine the responses of self and others while in an estranged state and respond to the theoretical body of knowledge on the area being studied. In particular, estrangement autoethnography can reveal and so lead to a challenge of 'common-sensical, taken-for-granted notions' (Barone and Eisner, 2006 p.96).

While estrangement autoethnography is an established research tool, it is less common as a teaching tool even though it maps well onto established learning tools used to encourage student reflection (see Brookfield and Preskill (2005)). It is also an experiential learning process (as advocated by among others, Kolb (1984)) and may be seen as an example of what Dewey envisaged for education - a 'continuing reconstruction of experience' (1897 cited in Kolb and Kolb, 2005: 194). Estrangement autoethnography is a method of teaching which allows the student to discover autonomously, fulfilling the learning experience of Minh-ha: 'I know I do not learn anything when I am told what to learn; I learn when that learning comes from myself' (1991, 109). It is widely known that University requires that students become autonomous learners (Macaskill and Taylor, 2006; Biggs, 1999) as they find their own conclusions from an experience. With estrangement autoethnography, there is value placed on the responses and this can lead to a challenge to 'established' knowledge.

The Method in Use

The authors taught on a module titled Advertising and Consumer Culture between January and March 2012. A total of 30 students were registered on the course, of which 12 students opted for the estrangement autoethnographic task. The idea for the activities arose from a feeling that there was a lack of an authorial essay-style and a tendency to be 'used-by-theory', rather than the negotiation of theory by students based on their own understandings and experiences. The authors had experienced the module previously and noted how a combination of what might be seen as 'spaghetti essays' where there is a jumble of theoretical ideas or 'quote dumping' where extracts from theory are copied more than applied. Drawing on autoethnographic methods would, we hoped, provide students with the ability to debate and apply established ideas. The aim of using this method was thus to encourage individual interpretation, participation and provide a platform for autonomous experiential learning.

The 12 students who chose to engage in the autoethnographic task attended the standard lectures and seminars for the module. In addition, they attended sessions that introduced them to the principles of autoethnography and estrangement techniques. The estrangement activities included standing toe-to-toe with each other and then swapping partners followed by a discussion about how this felt and whether the partner or environment contributed to it being more or less acceptable. Having established that the students were aware of the nature and reasons for estrangement, instructions were sent to students by email to invite them to meet the authors in Birmingham where they were given a series of estrangement tasks to do. The following activities were designed to allow the students to experience estrangement in a familiar space. All of the activities were to be done by the students alone and they recorded their experiences by drawing or writing. The team-leader assigned who did which task and monitored their performance. Having completed one of the following tasks the student returned to the teaching team at an agreed venue where they were assigned a second task each.

Task One: Smile at strangers and note their responses.

Task Two: Ask three strangers for directions and draw the people you chose.

Task Three: A male student to walk three times around Ann Summers (a female-targeted sexual aid shop).

Task Four: Sit alone for five minutes without interruption and watch the shoppers.

Task Five: Order the same meal twice at McDonald's.

Task Six: Walk around The Disney Store three times and count how many times the assistants smile at you.

Task Seven: Find a space you feel comfortable in your gender and take photographs of it.

There are Health and Safety issues to be considered when doing this type of activity. The authors considered the issues and completed the relevant University Health and Safety forms with those students taking part. The nature of the experiment and the importance of safety were discussed with the students beforehand. Risks were limited due to the controlled nature of the experiment and the on-hand teacher presence. The activities took place over two hours with a half-hour break and facilitation in the middle to check on progress and safety. After this, there was a return to the University for debrief on student experiences and facilitated reflection.

Results of the Estrangement Activities

There were three points where the learning of the students could be assessed. Firstly, (i) the debrief took place immediately after the activities at the students' home University. Here, the experiences could be shared, discussed and compared. Furthermore, it gave the tutors the chance to re-introduce theory into the experiences and encourage critical reflection. The second place where the learning could be revealed was in a (ii) formal reflective essay. The final place was (iii) feedback. The following sections reveal some of the findings from the estrangement activities. All names have been changed in the accounts.

(i) The Debrief

The sharing in the debrief was important as one of the great strengths of autoethnography is that it promotes dialogue (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) and here the commonalities and differences were made clear. The students referred to the notes and drawings they had made while in the 'field'. For example, Sarah repeated her comments from Task Six, the Disney Store activity: 'False smile, constantly smiling...Music has happy effect, children will want to consume...shop is a happy place but it is a guise to give products meaning'. As these were relayed to the rest of the group a discussion followed about their experiences of working in the fast food industry and their being required to perform 'emotional labour'. Vanessa performed Task Five and on ordering the same meal twice from the same assistant commented: 'The idea of working at McDonald's terrifies me. Repetitive and constant work, boring, never connecting with anyone'. This was then extended to her experience of working in Starbuck's and the differences between the requirements of labour at these places were considered. The gender issue of shopping areas was apparent in the discussion with males struggling to find places to photograph in Task Seven and going to sport shops for a comfortable space while females saw how the shops were designed to entice them. Sabina wrote: 'female shop assistants...female mannequins...posters depicting females only...red, white, pink...written messages (sexy and gorgeous)...visual messages (women together)' and the whole social construct of femininity was clearer as they were put in a position to observe the places and their responses.

Having discussed the findings for an hour with theory input from the lecturers, the results were put on a blog (a version of which can be seen here: <http://performingestrangement.wordpress.com>) with commentary. The blog acted to reinforce the discussion by summarizing and opening up the findings of individuals to all.

(ii) Reflective Essay

The module was assessed by a single reflective essay. Here, the students could demonstrate their levels of understanding the theory on consumer culture. It also revealed the benefits of using estrangement autoethnography as a teaching tool.

This example from Robert below shows that he gained insight from the situation and also found a way of contextualizing this into the theory from the module. This was written following the task to ask a stranger for directions and from this he had the insight about how brands communicate social positions.

'I noticed I wear a select range of brands, although at the time of purchase I didn't consciously know this, I am using these branded products to communicate who I am to others.... This applies to brands such as Billabong where they encompass a lifestyle, giving a product the attributes of its respective culture. I believe it can be further analysed, I think we buy the product in order to communicate with our sub-culture not the culture as a whole. Bordieu referred to this as our taste culture, he went on to describe consumption as 'a stage in the process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code' (Bordieu, 1984, pg.2). The brand holds the code that only someone that shares my culture can decipher. When I buy Levi's jeans I do so as I feel it represents America, this can linked to me hobbies such a films and skateboarding.'

While the theoretical insights may be limited here, Robert started with himself and showed how the task made conscious that which was hidden. This was a common feature of the essays as it revealed to the students their consumption patterns and they made critical responses to it. Asked to do the same task, Anna's account below also found that her search for strangers was mediated by brands but that the act revealed the urgent nature of the consumer process:

'I learnt through this study that we still shop because we seek individuality; we think we have found it but it is simply an illusion, as Adorno (2001) would say pseudo individuality...Bocock interestingly suggests now people are 'hooked into desiring to consume goods' (1993: 53), which explains the constant consuming, we are consuming ourselves, a process of reification, 'people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile' (Marcuse, 1968). This was evident in the study as there was something driving the shoppers to find the goods they were looking for, when a peer asked them for directions, one woman was

unaware she was even being spoken to and many brushed off the query and barely stopped at all, they were too focused on the end result, as Bocoock quite rightly suggests, '...the more they consume, the more they will desire to consume' (Bocoock 1993: 69).'

A second task, walking around Ann Summers also brought separate responses dependent, unsurprisingly, on gender. In both Charlotte's and Ahmed's Account below, the activity gave a place to explore feelings about gender and consumption. Charlotte wrote:

'I found shops such as Ann Summers' extremely liberating and intimidating at the same time. It's a cocktail of emotions that range from feeling social acceptance for having sexual desires and being able to be open about them within the consumer space, but also embarrassment of having those sexual desires made open and public to the strangers around you. My teammate found Ann Summers' a comfortable environment for her as she is very comfortable with her sexuality; however she was dislodged from this comfort when an older male was within close proximity to her. I could see this happening to myself very easily because Ann Summers' does have an element of a woman's locker room environment where men are openly discussed and even mocked within a sexual narrative.'

Ahmed, had a different response but he became equally aware of the gendered space and recognised his 'maleness' in contrast to it:

'I felt so uncomfortable when entering the store that it led me to consider the cause. Ann Summer gives women a voluntary spatial identity associated with a place outside of the home (DeSena 2008); a gendered space where lone males are frowned upon...'

In both accounts the students managed to reflect on themselves and their position in the environment. Estrangement activities allowed them to produce autoethnographic reflective accounts when arguably by just taking students into a consumer environment or asking them to write on the subject in a more abstract manner would not have resulted in this level of engagement or insight.

Sitting still for five minutes with no distraction in an environment designed to keep people moving and shopping was difficult for some students particularly those who were questioned by security staff. The actions of these powerful others revealed to the students how

controlled and private the consumer spaces are and how modes of behaviour are controlled first by the establishment of norms, second by the creation of a physical environment and third, if necessary, by force. Shaun gave the observation below. It starts with his experience and is in a critical theoretical dialogue on the subject. This is advanced academic work and while it is seen in more conventional assignments, the estrangement activities, we feel, encouraged a higher level of critical debate.

‘Another thing I learnt from the autoethnographic act of sitting and watching shoppers as they go by was how ‘others were strangers’ (Lury, 2011: 59) as they walked around not acknowledging anyone else around them, including myself. As consumers, we do not tend to interact with the social structure and we are happy with this, Allison (1978) suggests that when we do interact with the social structure we feel separated from it and our self thus...we could experience our self as an alien, losing our identity. This concept of alienation dominates the history of social thought (Seeman, 1959) by suggesting that consumers no longer think as a social group like they used to (Ickes, 1978) as they are alienated from each other. Alienation is the result of four underlying psychological issues undergone by consumers (Johnson, 1996); these are marketplace powerlessness (the lack of power to change anything), self-estrangement (‘Alienating us even from our own alienation’ (Eagleton, 1984:61)), normlessness (loss of the sense of individuality) and isolation.’

These extracts give a ‘taste’ of the kinds of response but the authors were pleased with the way experience informed which theory was chosen. Furthermore, the level of understanding of the theory was improved compared to previous years, possibly as they had ‘lived’ it.

(iii) Feedback

The overall sense from the feedback was that the autoethnography task had been ‘fun’. The students had enjoyed the game nature of the day and being placed in unusual situations. They had also enjoyed the group nature of the activities and supported each other through it; one clear observation for us was the way that these students were facilitating their own networks of support, which then provided a critical space to enable reflection without any fear of exclusion. Fun, though, does not mean learning. There is, of course, a danger in a model of Higher Education that caters to the market, where ‘fun’ is sought to increase student satisfaction to the detriment of academic quality. But given the nature of the day, and how the students’ feedback and assignments imply a different form of learning, we would suggest that being able to use their experiences as the foundation for applying theory constituted this sense of fun. Further feedback was gained from the students six months

later to ascertain whether any changes had resulted from the activity. All of the respondents replied and stated that the activities had impacted on how they viewed shopping centres and the nature of consumption. One student summed up the responses writing that it had let him 'see beyond the curtain'. This Wizard of Oz analogy was fitting as consumer environments can be glamorous and hide what estrangement reveals.

Conclusion

Estrangement autoethnography worked well for the module and the authors believed it improved the quality of the learning of the students. Estrangement autoethnography as a learning method was ideal for consumer culture but there was no reason why it cannot be used much wider. Camangian (2010) advocates it for the study of English and Pennington (2007) for initial teacher-training. In the latter example, an educational context, for example, can be revealed by 'estrangement' techniques so the teacher can learn what it means to be in a school system. Disaffected students may feel estranged from their environments and so activities designed to de-normalise the classroom can give insight to teacher trainers into the controlled and limiting nature of the environment.

From the experience of the authors, estrangement autoethnography increased student engagement with the topic, improved the level of autonomous thought, meant there was a greater element of critical engagement. The activities also gave the students authority over the theory as their experiences 'in the field' could be used to debate ideas. The authors have continued with this practice in their own teaching adapting it to different modules as well as disseminating the idea to others in the Higher Education sector.

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Biographies

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