

EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: OUR PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH THOUGHT AND FEELING.

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This paper explores the art of narrating personal history through writing and of what we are able to learn about ourselves through such an undertaking. We shall consider this narration as both an innovation within the lecture hall and as a tool with which to strengthen and enrich experiential sensitivity and critical reflection. The paper consists of the following parts: background to the **educational autobiography** (henceforth referred to as **eab**), objectives and contents of the activity, the role of the educator or teacher in formative biographical activities, ethical issues, and some conclusions¹.

I. BACKGROUND TO THE ACTIVITY.

I would like to comment upon the circumstances in which the work outlined in this paper has been realised. It is my hope that the details included herein will enable a better understanding of this activity, presented before colleagues drawn from different countries with highly diverse university systems, cultural frameworks and linguistic horizons. Secondly, I would like to point out from the start that the work presented here has been undertaken in a crowded university environment where tutors may find themselves (as is my own case) working with up to 300 students a year.

I would, however, like to demonstrate that even in an overcrowded system it is possible to offer creative alternatives, designed to enable students to accommodate within the framework of academic rigour (reading, rational reflection and research), a growing postmodern sensitivity shared by young people (experience, subjectivity and uncertainty).

¹ This paper has a practical orientation. Nevertheless, in my practice with life history methods, I am in debt with different authors; among others: Bolívar et al. (2001); Denzin (1989); Dominicé (1996; 2000); Galvani (1997); Goodson (1992); Houde (1999); Lainé (1998); Lani-Bayle (1997); Le Grand & Coulon (2000); Pineau (2000); Pineau & Le Grand (2002); West (1996). I am particularly grateful to Dr. Jean-Louis Le Grand (University of Paris 8, Saint-Denis, France) and Dr. Linden West (Canterbury Christ Church University College, England) for inspiration, support and friendship. Thanks also to Laura Formenti (Università Milano Bicocca).

This activity has been included over three years (2002, 2003 and 2004) within the “Anthropology of Education” teaching programme (45 hours; 3 hours a week). I have continued to develop it in 2005. The students involved are in their first year of a five-year degree in Educational Studies at the University of Seville, Andalusia, in the southwest of Spain.

The Anthropology of Education course content consists of two parts: theory and practice. In the theory part we have studied, briefly, the following: theoretical issues, the history and methodology of cultural Anthropology; biographical and ethnographical methodologies; cultural Anthropology as applied to schools and education. In the practical part of the course I offer the students one of the following two options: writing of the eab or participant observation in an educational environment of their choosing. So far, some 85% of students have chosen to write the eab. In each year I have taught four groups of students (80 students in each group, totalling over 300 students and 180 class hours annually) without assistance or collaboration. Although there are normally about 80 students in each group, the eab project has been completed by an average of 50 students. The rest have either opted for the alternative, participant observation, or have failed to complete the course. Over the last 3 years a total of 600 students have thus written up their eab. The majority of these students have been female (90%). It is unusual to find people above the age of 25 in class. About 80% of students are aged between 18 and 21. Practically all of them study full-time and do not work

II. THE OBJECTIVES AND CONTENTS OF EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

The elaboration of the educational autobiography is grounded in the following objectives:

- To develop self-knowledge.
- To nurture the capacity to analyse and criticize the different everyday life settings (family, schooling, media, friend’s group, free time, employment, etc).
- To educate in the love, pleasure and rigor of writing.
- To relate the personal biography with family, neighbourhood and local settings, and global social and cultural context.
- To encourage student involvement in the learning process.
- To rethink personal problems, in order to create resources to cope with everyday life constraints.
- To reflect on time, memory, remembering and the life course from a diachronic standpoint.

In short, the aim of the eab is to foment self-reflection, the clearest possible comprehension of our life circumstances, mutual understanding, tolerance and the capacity to play an active role in our own lives within the confines of a certain social conditioning.

An initial outline for the project, set down on paper and then discussed with students, consists of a list of basic contents, which aim to aid the student in writing his or her eab.

These are flexible suggestions which the students can adapt or modify in any way they feel convenient. The basic contents are as follows:

- A family tree.
- The family group (the family unit to which the student belongs, defined by the members living within the family household).
- Local environment (village or neighbourhood - in the case of cities - in which the student permanently resides).
- The student's lifeline.
- A personal escutcheon.
- The educational experiences of the student throughout the various stages of their education: from 0 – 6 years old (prior to obligatory schooling), between 6 – 12 years (which corresponds to their primary schooling), from 12 –18 years (which corresponds to obligatory secondary education and to the sixth form) and the students current stage (as they begin their university studies).
- Reflections on and interpretation of the outcome of the above experiences.
- An appendix or attachments: photographs; personal, family or academic documents.

In practice, some students omit their family details and comment solely on their educational experiences from a diachronic point of view (in some cases students do not want to talk about their family situation because of serious problems). Others work heavily on the family tree or on the family group, and pay much less attention to the other suggestions. The majority of students begin work on the eab with the intention of following the suggested guidelines, but time factors, personal interests, the attitude of the various members of their family as regards the eab and a number of other factors alter those initial plans with the result that the student may concentrate monographically on one or more of the various points.

We normally begin by building the family tree, which consists of the graphic representation of the student's family roots, showing as accurately as possible the branches of their maternal and paternal ancestors. Students hunt for the information needed to discover more about their predecessors. I tend to ask students to try to represent at least three generations on their family tree: their own generation, that of their parents and of both sets of grandparents.

The family tree allows students to represent their genealogy with a personal touch and results can vary from well-ordered schemata designed on computer in a conventional manner to the most artistic interpretations.

The aim in producing a family tree is to view our predecessors in their correct social, economic, cultural and axiological contexts. This allows us to reflect in depth over the significance and the extent of the influence of our grandparents, parents and siblings. For this the student presents information about some of the following aspects: places of birth and residence, important dates, main occupations, moral and religious beliefs, political ideologies, economic situations, family development, significant crises and transitions. One of the objectives of the tree lies in identifying and evaluating the symbolic and

material universe of the student's maternal and paternal branches. Later the student may reflect over the influence exerted by both branches of ancestors upon his or her own life's journey and conception of the world.

In some cases students have explored the roots of their families in great depth, with the help of the spoken accounts of their parents, grandparents and great grandparents, and also with the help of family photographs and videos. They have also consulted public archives, church records and websites of Internet. Ways of collecting such information are many and various.

Reflections about the student's family *group* (their household and the members which compose it) might start from physical and material elements. A plan of the house, drawn by a student, may serve as a useful means by which to consider the distribution of space, such as the differing interpretations between individuals of the same quantity of space

The communicative, cultural and educational dynamics of each family allows us to see the various symbolic and axiological levels that shape the family system and the relationships between different members of the whole (father and mother; parents and children; siblings with each other; men and women; different generations living together under the same roof). The conflict between siblings as regards general life, educational and professional agendas have revealed itself to be very useful. The reformulation of families is also an important phenomenon. Parents changing partner, the death of a family member, adoptions, the increasing visibility of homosexual partnerships and the freedom with which young people are able to accept pluralistic sexual identities, are shaping a familial landscape very different to the Spain of General Franco half a century ago. This social change is, in comparison with other European countries, much more drastic here.

One approach that I recommend for tackling the student's *local environment* (neighbourhood, village or sector in which the family home lies) is to trace out a plan of their area. This allows us to place the household and those surrounding it in a wider social, economic, cultural and axiological context. Students are encouraged to discover their local environment not only through a sociological perspective but also through an economic, religious, cultural and occupational one, amongst others. Social class, parents' work, values, religious festivals and transition from the rural to the urban are themes which students examine in their autobiographical narration.

The *lifeline* consists of the chronological representation of the most important events in the student's life along a temporal axis from birth up to the present time. In the eab project this is normally shown as a vertical line, along which key points are plotted in order. The lifeline facilitates a summarised view of the complete life journey of the student.

To assist students in the preparation of the final part of their commentary on the development of their learning experiences, I advise students to organise the lifeline into two parts: academic life and non-academic features (family, other institutions, rites of

passage and significant moments, mentors and role models, friendships, achievements, crises and difficult times, etc.).

The *personal escutcheon* is a symbolic depiction of personal identity. Imitating the coats of arms found in traditional heraldry, the student creates his or her own shield, which is divided into the following four sections: their most important childhood memory (a glimpse back to the past), their greatest ambition for the future, their favourite pastime and their own most redeeming quality as they see it. The coat of arms allows the graphic expression of a personal imagery in which a reasonably free set of criteria allows the student to depict what they see of themselves in their own chosen manner. The coat of arms is a simple activity, which takes up only one or two class sessions but which normally stimulates keen interest on the part of the majority of students.

The textual narration and chronology of the *development of the student's learning experiences*, from birth (and sometimes including the mother's pregnancy) up to the present, forms a large part of the eab. Life journeys are organised into three main stages: from birth until the start of obligatory schooling; the phase of the student's life which coincides with primary education (6 – 12 years); and obligatory secondary education (12 – 18 years) including higher education. This journey culminates with a piece about the new world of university. For students asking for advice to help them write, I recommend that in each of the three main periods of their account they organize the narration in terms of the various spheres in which we encounter human learning: the family, school, the media (radio, television, video, cinema, consoles and video games, personal computers, periodicals), interaction with their childhood and teenage fellows, church, spare time, etc. A wide selection of themes are covered which provide a rich combination of learning experiences, right from the learning of sphincter muscle control to the anxiety experienced during university access examinations.

The *interpretation and reflections* section consists of a process of evaluation which takes place as the writing of the eab is nearing its completion. This evaluation allows a look at the sum total of the student's educational experience and enables us to establish connections between the different areas worked upon during the composition of the eab. In many cases the evaluation section is that which links together the past (which we might consider the 'star' of the eab), the present and the future.

This is the part of the eab which favours meaning and interpretation. Here we reconsider the meaning attributed to our lifetime and also examine the very process of autobiographical writing itself. This requires us to reflect upon our personal identities and their relationship to our personal and inter-personal history. Via identity we arrive at the 'I' and at those many different types of 'I': the unusual, the hidden, that perceived by others, the wished for, the public, subjective experience, reconstruction and re-enactment.

The interpretation of one's own life entails a study of the relationship between personal trajectory and education. In this sense, the eab provides an opportunity for us to re-evaluate our own projects, hopes and ambitions, combining pasts, presents and futures in search of a coherent life narrative beyond mere fragments.

III. ROLE OF THE TEACHER.

In the production of eab, the role of the teacher is a central issue. From my own point of view, and from my own experience, the teacher must assume responsibility for the following roles at least:

- The provision of clear guidelines as to how students might go about the eab, from its initiation, through to its development and conclusion, bearing in mind their already overloaded work schedule (students have too much material to cover, too many hours of classes and exams) and the relatively short time available (3 to 4 months). This does not mean that the eab should not be an enjoyable and profound experience in creative work and intellectual autonomy.
- The encouragement of students towards research and investigation with the purpose of recovering evidence of the past and recollecting experiences and feelings long since forgotten or neglected, to converse with family members, mentors, friends and educators.
- Assistance with the writing process by providing students with solutions when they find themselves 'blocked' and offering strategies to overcome other problems that may be encountered. For this it is necessary that the students have a positive view of the project and are aware that through the writing of their eab there are valuable and original gains to be made.
- Easing of the anxiety and discomfort that some students feel when it come to the writing of their eab. Such difficulties are numerous and profound in the early stages of the activity. On completing the project, most students feel highly satisfied with the results they have achieved.

The eab is an educational activity and should be conceived neither as psychological treatment nor as psychotherapy. By the very nature of its objectives, methodology, background and end result, the eab restricts itself to the educational sphere. On this point I would like to reiterate that the focus of the eab is not psychological or psychotherapeutic. Notwithstanding this, it is certainly possible that the eab could have therapeutic effects. Here the teacher plays an important role helping students towards self-enrichment by putting into practice his or her own knowledge of human relations. The teacher needs to know how to manage the activity effectively, overcoming problems and difficulties whilst remaining firmly within the sphere of education and not crossing over into areas which pertain exclusively to clinical psychology.

IV. ETHICAL ISSUES.

In terms of ethics, it is very important to give students the choice to undertake the writing of an eab or not. For this reason I give them the alternative option of a participant observation task. Students should in no way be forced to write about matters which are both personal and private to them. Moreover, it is important to reassure students that the writing of an eab will bring no negative consequences upon its author.

From the very outset, the written guidelines to the exercise create a sound and stable framework as regards objectives, methodology, the limits of the activity, respect for privacy, right to anonymity and the enriching and empowering advantages of the project for students.

The part of the autobiography dealing with the family environment has presented some very serious ethical issues. It is important that the student respect the secrets and taboos of their family (strangely enough, in some cases, students have insisted on narrating some private matter that their family has always kept to themselves whilst I, on the other hand, have tried to convince them of the need to respect and to protect such family secrets). It is also of prime importance that any commentary written by the student on their family be readily available and acceptable to all family members involved. Convincing students of the importance of these issues has not always been easy.

In contrast to the opinion of some colleagues who consider the undertaking of life histories by year groups who themselves are to be subjected to academic evaluation, I have maintained the opposite. However, I have started from the premise that all written autobiographies – provided that they are of the minimum 6000 word count – are worthy of positive evaluation. To assist in the awarding of a numerical mark, I classify pieces of work into one of several categories according to the capacity students have demonstrated for addressing the suggested project guidelines (in particular the competence with which students have adopted a reflective, critical, or interpretive focus on their experiences; which is not something that all students are willing or able to do). In many cases students present a straight narrative of personal events which lacks any analytical or critical dimension. In any case, I have preferred take such risks and develop the eab project rather than forego the activity due to the difficulties in accommodating it within the formal parameters of an academic teaching programme (the marking of the projects is perhaps the most controversial and problematic issue which arises through its inclusion).

To give students some idea of what we mean by ‘critical reflection’ and of what is required of them before they commence work on their eab, I present them with a list of factors or elements which generally contribute to the above: serious commitment in terms of time and energy; the comparison and contrast of differing perspectives; intelligent reflections upon spatial and temporal dimension; an analysis of the concept of culture (and of sub-culture) as applied to different spheres of life (family, school, means of information and communication, peers and leisure time, etc); originality and creativity in the layout and presentation of one’s life history; the ability to distance oneself and to

provide objective criticism with respect to one's family environment, school and socio-culture; presentability and the correct use of language.

I further take the opportunity to state clearly, within the guidelines presented to students, some essential points: the eab is not obligatory for anyone; in writing their eab students are quite within their rights to omit any issues they wish (some choose to omit family matters); all students must promise not to divulge private matters discussed in class work on the eabs; material that is derogatory or defamatory will not be accepted as this is liable to upset others and to be counterproductive; the final versions of the project belong to the authors and any further use of them will only be made with students' permission; classroom dynamics of respect, listening, discovery and participation are of central importance; the student must at all times respect the right to privacy of his fellow family members, teachers, friends and other close acquaintances.

V. CONCLUSIONS: DILEMMAS AND PERSPECTIVES.

Writing of the eab is an intensely educational activity in which both the students and myself have learned a great deal. The eab permits us to establish close links between the education offered by the university, the experiential world of the student and the socio-cultural background to the whole. The eab opens up a powerful process of personal reflection, analysis, questioning and maturation. In the work produced by students we encounter the living pulse of human experience: illness, friendship, loss, pain, joy, that which has been long forgotten, separation, jealousies, all manner of other feelings, religious beliefs, shared experiences, death, sadness and personal crisis.

The eab is an innovatory educational project at university level, a practical activity in writing which focuses upon life histories and an attempt to conduct educational investigation from the standpoint of practical teaching. The eab is at the same time an adventure, a risk and an open project. It is also a self-generating project, continually renewed through the course of its own development. This paper hopes to provide at least a summarized account of the different perspectives from which we can interpret the eab.

To conclude, I would like to plant some questions which have arisen from various issues encountered during the above outlined work with eabs. Considering a few such 'dilemmas' seems to me an appropriate way to end. The first dilemma is one that concerns the divergent standpoints of the teacher and of the student. From my perspective as teacher, the eab is an educational tool, which contributes towards the development of critical thought and expression. From a student's perspective, however, the eab is an activity very different from – and sometimes an alternative to – other university tasks. Students bring a lot of enthusiasm to their portrayal of family life and school life and tend to forget the educational objectives and criteria of the activity. Students tend to value the eab in terms of it as a door to their emotional nature, subjectivity, experience and personal recollections whereas for my part as teacher, I value it as an instrument with which to consider experience, to amass knowledge and understanding of education in its multifarious contexts, and to augment students' ability to evaluate the phenomenon of learning through a diachronic perspective, within the framework of various spheres of

socialization (family, school, peers, means of communication and information, free time and leisure, etc.). Up till now it has been difficult to reconcile both viewpoints.

The dilemma as to which is preferable, guided or free autobiography is one that should rightly accompany us throughout the process of eab production, from the initial presentation of the activity to the final stages of writing. On the one hand I have offered guidelines to the students from early on. These guidelines aim to provide a framework as well as suggestions on format and content. On the other hand, the practical dynamics of the eab remain flexible. The initial project outline needs to be a tenable proposition for, and applicable to, a large group of students with diverse expectations, interests, experiences and motivations. It is here that the spontaneous facet of the activity comes into its own. It is important that each student is allowed the freedom to follow their own inspiration a little, to discover the activity for themselves regardless of what their classmates may be doing and, occasionally, even to begin working in the opposite direction to the task guidelines. Some guidance is a definite must, born of the high number of students that undertake the activity. At the same time however, the freedom to adapt criteria, focus, content and presentation is also necessary to avoid the eab running the risk of being perceived as just another traditional academic exercise.

The dilemma between theory and practice is also a central feature of the eab project. Whilst my initial outlines for the task are drawn from publications on life histories as educational and investigational tools, the activity outlined in this paper is rooted deeply within my teaching practice and has developed gradually over the course of the last 15 years. The forward motion of the project has necessarily entailed the growth and evolution of the original idea and the increasing depth to which existing aspects of the activity have been explored, with new elements continually added, have transformed the eab into an open process of reflective investigation.

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