

Creating Spaces for Reflection with Digital Autoethnography: Students as Researchers into Their Own Practices

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Abstract

This article discusses how digital technologies give students agency in creating new spaces for their reflective activity. Undergraduate art and design students from across fine art, textiles, fashion, interiors, graphics and illustration and animation degree programmes experimented with digital tools, platforms and social media to document and examine their own making. The research took place at a further education college with externally validated higher education provision in the North West of England. Thirteen students signed up as research participants and shared blogs and documentation, had tutorials recorded and completed in-depth interviews. The research project investigated how and what technologies students used and whether their use stimulated in-depth reflection on their art and design practices and developing professional identities. This student-led pedagogy evidences an inclusive approach where they used autoethnography to support themselves as researchers into their own practices; the methodology became a strategy for critical and dialogic reflection. Participants took part in several unstructured interviews providing a wealth of rich phenomenological data. Thematic analysis as defined by Braun & Clarke (2006), was used as a method to analyse and identify patterns of experience, interpretations and descriptions across the data set, enabling me to see and make sense of these collective and shared meanings.

Keywords

digital technologies, autoethnography, reflection, empowerment, student-led, spaces

I realised that I had developed habits making my own work. I no longer related to the words, constructed narrative and representation of my practice, uncritically copying and pasting phrases into my artist statements and biographies. Allowing curiosity and a scepticism towards these ingrained perceptions, and what had

become habits in my teaching and artistic practices, enabled me to become aware of my biases and didacticism, what Richards & Richards (2013) term 'power cognizance'. Similarly, colleagues and I were often frustrated with our students' critical reflection and focus on final outcomes rather than their processes. Annotation and discussion frequently required excessive leading or remained descriptive; students were often resistant to experimentation, exploration, play and 'not knowing'. I wondered what student experiences of making work were really like, what they thought about and felt while making their work and how they could find ways to articulate this, begin to define their practice, and define themselves as practitioners.

Advocates of personal narratives and autoethnography Ellis & Bochner (2000, 746) ask: 'why should caring and empathy be secondary to controlling and knowing?'. Could I become a more empathetic teacher and what does it feel like to make work? Schön's (1983, 299) reflective practitioner places themselves in the student role: 'to experience and reveal the confusions they had always assumed they were expected to suppress or keep private'.

From examining my artistic practice, the research became focused on (digital) autoethnography as a pedagogy for empowerment, specifically, how digital technologies mediate spaces for reflexivity. Using what I termed 'digital autoethnography', making unseen elements of my art making experiences visible, had two main purposes: discovering what it was like for me to reposition myself as a learner to empathise with my students, and to reveal to them what my making experience as an artist was like. For me, the digital was a means to record my physical actions, to re-visit them and to evidence different viewpoints. It was also a way to record sound and verbalise thoughts. The private and public digital platforms, including a blog space (Figure 1), became sites for these recordings and reflections.

The beginning part 2: Ideas and the start of the creative process documented...

October 22, 2013
PhD Research, Submerged
practice-led, research
Leave a comment

This is the context for the work I will be making and 'The Book of Knowledge' volume COU - GEN the starting point. The imagery I am drawn to will be responded to in a variety of ways...

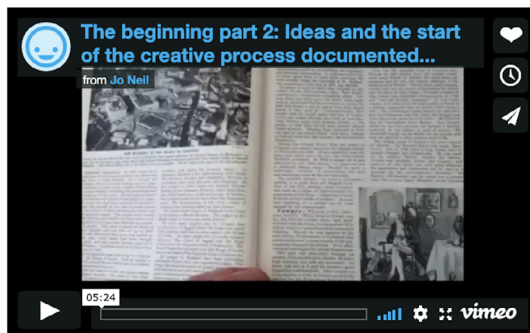


Figure 1
Screenshot from research blog

It could be argued that digital media is embedded in our everyday lives and that most anthropological studies would involve the digital. But Pink et al. (2016, 2) believe that 'doing research with, through and in an environment partially constituted by digital media has led to the development of new and innovative methods and challenged existing conceptual and analytical categories'. I was interested in using autoethnography to see what could be made visible to me and what reflection might take place. The digital was a means to observe and an opportunity to reflect and re-see through different media. Using digital tools – Go-Pro headcam, film camera, audio recorder and a blog – I became the subject, and my creative process, the object of my research. The culture I was immersed in for my ethnographic study was arts practice. Wegerif (2013, 129) discusses the potential of using the virtual space of the Internet for dialogic writing and thinking. He considers the dialogic self not as an 'isolated individual but a self with others acting as part of a global creative intelligence'. The affordances of the Internet and digital to share, socially interact and co-construct knowledge are widely accepted, but not necessarily significant whether the perceived community is real or imagined. Boellstorff (2012) emphasises that the real and virtual are not blurring or at odds but that digital anthropology can examine similarity and difference through participant observation: digital is more than just electronic, it is about relationships between offline and online. Ryan (2014, 12) asserts that digital spaces are an effective way to help students take a step back, almost forcing a position of 'other' to their own work, 'making reflection visible in its multi-layered dimensions transforms it into a rigorous space for learning and action ... making their own reflection visible to themselves and others'.

Artistic practice is often described as a process, which suggests engagement with a sequence, set of rules and knowing what might occur next. Definitions of 'process' include: 'a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result', 'a series of actions or operations conducing to an end' (Merriam-webster.com 2019). These emphasise procedural and mechanistic approaches. Visualisations on the web of the 'creative making process' frequently use metaphors of gestation, incubation and birth and illustrate this as ill-defined, chaotic and messy or perfectly formed procedures, cycles and loops similar to reflective and learning cycles. In both cases it seems that the process is something that happens to you rather than something you direct yourself. The experience of making is represented as mechanistic, systematic, instrumental and neat rather than personal, confusing, uncertain, experiential and complex.

The more I considered what the making process was like for students, what it felt like, as well as how it operated for them, the more I reflected on the relationship between critical reflection, empowerment pedagogies, student to professional identity shifts and strategies for lifelong learning. From my own experiences I wondered if students consciously and purposefully framed their own reflection as self-observation and research into themselves, could they be empowered by using digital auto-ethnography and what spaces for reflection are created?

The 'Seeing Practice' project worked with students across the creative arts with the uniting aim that it focused on helping students to develop and understand their own creative practices, through supporting their reflective processes and how they transition from being a student to practitioner or at least consider where they would situate themselves/their practice within their discipline area/creative arts as a whole. Do they question their artistic practices enough or is it too easy to being comfortable performing mechanistically from instruction, habit or limited

experience? I felt that the cyclical or linear explanations of the creative process did not help students think about the making process as *their* process, *their* practice or encourage them to question what *they* do. Learmonth & Huckvale's (2012, 107) analogy of the creative process as a river provides an alternative and embraces the uncertainty rather than habit of making:

creative process is like a river: eroding and/or building up what contains it; growing and/or shrinking according to what goes in or is extracted from it; adaptive to objects in its path; sensitive to toxic and 'nutritional' inputs; and flowing faster or slower as it shapes and is shaped by its landscape, and it is going somewhere – irrepressibly. You cannot research a river by isolating a section and stopping its flow, because then it would not be a river.

Fendler's (2013) nomadic pedagogy locates the learner as a traveller through, and arriving at, different locations where learning occurs. For this research project these different locations included digital tools and platforms, the spaces that being a researcher and research participant create: the interview space and learning outside of assessed modules and locations outside the walls of the institution. Fendler (2013, 787–8) describes learning as the change that happens while making discoveries in unfamiliar territory:

In relation to nomadic practices, the eventful space of learning becomes a space of experiential learning. As a space characterized by the potential it has to evoke change, it comes to be defined by a double movement, where learning practices are displaced (becoming mobile) and where learning itself is its own form of displacement (i.e., a change in one's worldview). In this context, learners as nomadic subjects are involved in becoming-other, engaging in a relationship with their surroundings.

Employing digital autoethnography as a research methodology to understand practice was a strategy for reflection, valuing not knowing and relinquishing control. Artist Emma Cocker (2013, 126) describes not knowing as paralysing and prohibitive, 'it can usher in the feelings of anxiety and embarrassment, the debilitating sense of being at a loss or lost, unable to see a way out or forward', but also as 'an active space within practice, wherein an artist hopes for an encounter with something new or unfamiliar, unrecognizable or unknown'. Participants made use of digital autoethnography with autonomy which enabled me to investigate the significant differing and common experiences between participants and between participants and myself. Braun & Clarke (2012) suggest Thematic Analysis can be used for a wide range of research questions, from those about people's experiences or understandings to those about the representation and construction of particular phenomena in particular contexts. Examining the interviews and additional artefacts generated by the participants enabled themes to be identified. A theme, according to Braun & Clarke, is a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question, they tell a convincing and compelling story about the data. The process of doing a thematic analysis on their interviews and shared sources illuminated codings that developed into themes which are broadly the shifting creative process, using digital technologies to externalise thoughts and processes and defining the creative process. The construction or perception of

different spaces to reflect and make work in, became a significant thread that can be woven through these core themes.

Participant O6, a second-year fashion student, found that watching a video recording and seeing herself making again was a very different experience to seeing while making. When making, she found that she was very close to the work and focusing too much on what she was doing in that moment. Short videos of her process and revisiting her making were useful for getting ideas for her written annotation, it gave her more information and the space to observe in more detail how materials behaved differently to her folding technique. As she said, 'while you are watching it you are actually seeing yourself doing it as well and how you have to use your body to do which shapes or how you control it without it moving around too much' (Participant O6, interviewed by J. Neil, 10 March 2016). Participant O6 also used a digital voice recorder to record reflections about her assessed work which later developed into recording informal conversations at home with her sibling. These recordings prompted more in-depth reflection on her processes, significantly how her thoughts occur in several languages: English, German and Urdu. Writing as she was thinking had become a barrier because she was also translating words for the reader:

my thoughts usually are a mixture of English and German so when I record, you know like a word that I can't say in English, I will just say in German . . . if I were to write in my sketchbook adding a German word confuses . . . so I think recording actually helps. After that listening to it and writing it down, I look at the translation of the word I have used. (Participant O6, interviewed by J. Neil, 10 March 2016)

For participant O6, this awareness related to knowing herself better. In the first interview she found that recording her accumulated random thoughts enabled her to clear her head, while re-listening helped her to begin to understand her feelings better. In the second interview she had noticed that listening back enabled her to notice how she said things: 'I think the reason why I am using these devices is more for the psychological and emotional part of it and finding out who I really am' (Participant O6, interviewed by J. Neil, 25 July 2016).

Participant O7, a third-year illustration student, found managing her dyslexia and messy writing difficult with handwritten annotation. She used her mobile phone to make voice notes and make videos of her work. A significant finding for participant O7 was that through watching footage back she noticed mistakes in her work more easily; she described this as being like the technique of holding a mirror up to a drawing and being able to see clearly the errors reflected back in reverse. The camera picked up qualities in the materials as well as proportion and technical issues with her drawing that she could not see while in the moment of making the work. For participant O10, an extract from her blog (Figure 2) explains how making digital imagery enabled her to also see different qualities in her paper-based work:

Participants frequently found that the documentation of process resulted in resolved pieces of work. Participant O13, a fine art student, incorporated the documenting of the everyday into her practice (Figure 3):

The process of recording became a way for participant O7 to slow down and consider the work in more depth before progressing with it: 'I had a really bad habit of doing my sketch and then going straight into inking, rather than sort of taking five, looking at it thinking I need to like sort of move this before I ink it

As well as capturing the drawing process on video I took several still photographs, some of which can be seen in my studio space and in my sketchbook. The pictures have taken on a 3 dimensional quality where the material appears to stand out from the paper which was a surprising but very pleasing effect.



Figure 2

Excerpt from participant 10 blog

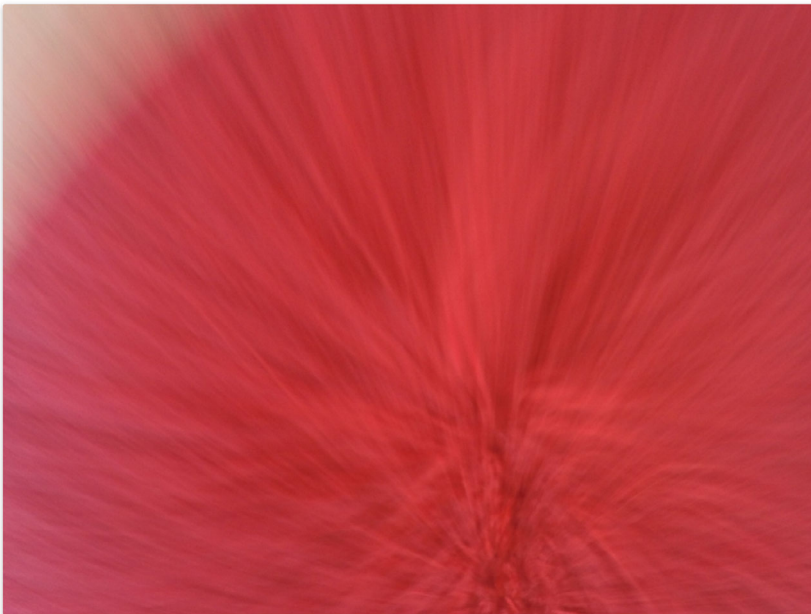
in afterwards' (Participant 07, interviewed by J. Neil, 14 March 2016). Participant 07 noticed that spending time recording and revisiting the documentation had impacted on her practice in different ways:

it's weird because I have sped up in some aspects but slowed down in others which I think has worked out for the better cause like I said I am not rushing the prep as much but I am being a lot more loose and less with the first initial like I use thumbnail sketches a lot more. (Participant 07, interviewed by J. Neil, 14 March 2016)

The speed at which time passes between making work and while making work was raised by participant 10, who found that it was important to build in planned periods of reflection:

stopping the making process is ok, taking time to live with the work I have made, to situate it in different contexts and to photograph it in different ways will all help me to see it differently and perhaps even offer a glimpse of how it is seen by others. (Participant 10, WordPress Blog, 24 April 2016)

The participant interviews also created spaces to reflect in. Participant 10 discussed her relationship with her practice, providing an eloquent and lengthy account of the materials she was using and how they related to hidden narratives in the work and practitioners she felt connected to (Participant 10, interviewed by J. Neil, 9 December 2016). When asked if this was articulated or documented anywhere else, it became apparent, 'not as comprehensively as the way I have just



Bath Work-

Photograph taken using GoPro Camera

Photograph of my dressing gown as I put it on

Figure 3

Image from participant 13 blog

spoken to you' (Participant 10, interviewed by J. Neil, 9 December 2016), that it was in the moment of the interview that this description of herself as an artist and her work had been partly constructed: 'this is quite a new emerging sort of idea and recognition' (Participant 10, interviewed by J. Neil, 9 December 2016). The interview provided a space for reflection and through a consolidation of experiences participants were able to construct their own narrative. In the interview participant 04 explained ideas for her next piece of work in relation to using documentation techniques; when asked, she explained that moment was the first time she had verbalised it.

The digital autoethnography embedded into the creative making process potentially enables students to develop the skills to continually and autonomously reflect on and develop their own practices and professional identities nomadically. But, significantly, it is being interviewed as a researcher into their own practices that students also found useful: 'this process of us talking, this process of interviewing it is a reflection on it and it is a self-assessment of it as well so all of that makes you think about your work in a different way' (Participant 10, interviewed by J. Neil, 9 December 2016). Participant 10 made the distinction between being interviewed as a research participant and a tutorial as a student:

I think the tutorial is very different because you are being marked against learning outcomes, we have got them forces at play ... also when people come and give you tutorials ... they bring their own preferences and their own aesthetical judgement into it ... so it feels like there are times when you might skew or bend what you are saying, how you say it in order to accommodate [forces]. (Participant 10, interviewed by J. Neil, 9 December 2016)

Conclusion

Boud (2000, 159) discusses the importance in helping students develop sustainable assessment practices by equipping them to be 'self-initiating seekers and users of formative assessment for their ongoing learning ... we must find ways of enabling students to develop their own skills in putting together schemes of formative assessment'. He defines sustainable assessment as 'assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (Boud 2000, 151). The initial findings from students using digital technologies to facilitate spaces for reflection suggest a self-initiating form of self-assessment that provides students with the skills to continue to develop their practices and professional identities post-graduation.

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