

# ‘Pedagogies of Praxis for Real World Critical Reflection; Professional Doctorate Reflexivity’

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## Facilitating Doctoral Level Reflection

Within doctoral level study – particularly Doctor of Philosophy programmes – much emphasis has been placed upon the implementation of relatively traditional approaches to question-led research. Autoethnography has, in Professional Doctorates particularly, a legitimacy where contribution to a field of practice can both be articulated and rooted philosophically. This legitimacy stems from the need to move beyond theory which is primarily explanatory, to one which can also focus on process and outcome within the context of employment and the recollection of career trajectories. Many of the Professional Doctorate students encountered in practice conceptualise and produce their stories or accounts of previous experience in the form of a chronological timeline which is marked with focal points of key achievements, critical incidents and major personal life events, which have influenced and shaped their particular career trajectories. It is in this context where autoethnography arguably has greatest significance in facilitating students as they seek to emphasise a deeply personal journey the destination of which is their current position and contribution to practice to date. With their Director of Studies and the critical feedback gained as a result of interaction with them, the student undertakes a process of co-construction of their journey, not necessarily rooted in a process of storytelling but in a directed and recursive narrative of personal and professional achievement. There can be accompanying issues with inter-subjectivity at this point and it is here that a rigorous approach to the use of autoethnography can provide valuable frameworks which transcend the dialogue of the Director of Studies with the Professional Doctorate student. The development of critical consciousness which permits the professional doctorate student to be a systematic and logical constructor of narrative discourse has been the focus of debate in educational disciplines for several years. The theoretical framework supporting and guiding the processes of reflection, praxis, and subsequently autoethnography, ultimately underpin the notion of reflexivity. Whether professional doctorate students need training in the development of critical consciousness remains an issue in curriculum development and curriculum justification across professional doctorate programmes.



## Embedding Autoethnography

Since the concept of history and recalled discourse plays such a central role in the development of the portfolio of evidence which students submit as an integral part of their assessment for the award of Professional Doctorate, it is necessary to frame these within an appropriate model for practical application. The three of greatest relevance are the Contextual-Action Theory of Career (Young and Valach, 2004; Young et al., 2002), the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2005) and the Systems Theory Framework (Patton and McMahon, 2006). Autoethnography as a discipline has long been acknowledged as a mechanism of comprehensively articulating elements of critical reflexivity relevant to different contexts and academic disciplines, but the case can be presented for its implementation in a doctoral programme which places value on the priori knowledge of doctoral students and the communities of practice to which they belong and contribute to. Autoethnography transcends particular disciplines, however central to all disciplinary approaches. Since it permits a true ontological and epistemological background to the generation of emergent theory, the participant can be clearly understood as being socially constructed and in a constant flux regarding their personal image. This is entirely attributable to the person underpinning the professional, which is significant in relation to the development of professional doctorate portfolios of evidence, which are arguably a reflection of the personal as well as the professional. In essence, autoethnography bridges the gap between theory and practice through the development of a critical discourse and the reflexivity which develops as a natural consequence of it. Narrative and storytelling can be regarded as being equivalent since both contribute to this discourse in terms of their contribution to the autoethnography of the student. In terms of underpinning ontological and epistemological approaches, it permits a clear acknowledgement of the essence of being a person and being a professional, which is a valuable addition to the student’s academic course of study and their own personal progression and transferable skill development as a reflexive practitioner. Positioning autoethnography as a trustworthy and authentic means of reflexive enquiry necessitates a consideration of the notion of personhood. Personhood transcends the professional doctorate student’s professional identity, regardless of where that might be situated, and permits their identity to be in the person rather than the professional. It is in the person that thoughts, feelings and value judgements can be legitimised and rationalised in terms of the personal decision making and critical introspection which often necessarily underpins professional practice. Ultimately it can define and frame the person and not just their professional identity.



## Aligning the Philosophical Basis of Autoethnography with the Professional Doctorate Programme

Whilst autoethnography has been presented in this article as a virtual panacea for the development of extended discourse, which informs the reader of the critical consciousness of the professional doctorate student, it still nevertheless has limitations which need to be acknowledged. It is certainly not universally accepted. Wacquant (2014), for example, warns us against the ‘glamorous seductions of post-modernist story telling’. Autoethnography is by no means universally accepted in academic circles, with Holt (2003) providing an interesting account of the difficulties of getting autoethnographical accounts published in the academic press. In common with any other autoethnographic accounts of personal and professional experience, there are no guarantees in inspiring interest in the reader of the professional doctoral thesis. In this it is important to differentiate between the concept of the ‘knower’ and the ‘potential knower’.

## Acknowledging the Limits of Self Knowing and the Need to Challenge Personal Assumptions



Acknowledging limits in ‘self-knowing’ is an issue of much contention (Wilson and Dunn, 2004), but the nature of all qualitative research means that it only has context specificity at the particular point in time of the experience being reported upon. This means that the ability to generalise from the narrative account of experience is either claimed or alluded to, and that in terms of assessing scientific rigour and quality, in comparison to empirically based Doctorate of Philosophy programmes, is not an issue.



In the context of professional doctorate programmes, autoethnography is a methodological tool which permits a critical understanding for professionals from a whole array of working contexts and environments.

## References

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Hayes, C., & Fulton, J. (2014). Auto ethnography as a method of facilitating critical reflexivity for professional doctorate students. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (8).