



A Reflexive Autoethnographic Fragment: Epiphany in a Milk Float

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Abstract

In *A Reflexive Autoethnographic Fragment: Epiphany in a Milk Float*, David Turner uses autoethnographic writing to begin to reflexively consider how his life history might have led him to an interest in a particular topic of study that he was about to embark on as part of research on the development of expertise in sports coaching, associated with a Professional Doctorate in Education course.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Autoethnography, Life History, Storytelling, Education, Expertise.

Introduction

The following autoethnographic fragment may be considered a response to Kim Etherington's (2004) call for a reflexive consideration of how the researcher's life history has led them to an interest in a particular topic of study. I wrote this shortly after embarking on a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) study on the development of expertise in sports coaching. This was a not inconsiderable challenge to take on in my circumstances at the time; I was a busy Principal Lecturer in Sports Coaching (and sports coach), Course Leader for a large and complex degree programme, and although I had secured a free staff development funded place on the EdD, I was allocated no work time whatsoever to actually complete it. Nevertheless, I was personally invested and curious enough to commit to 'evenings, weekends and holidays' in tackling this project, so exploring my own guiding motivations and suppositions was important. Thus, reflexivity was deliberately intertwined with the research process in order to not merely notice what we noticed, but also to notice how and why we noticed it (Moss, Barnes 2008). In this way we may strive to be as transparent as possible about our potential assumptions and influences (Pillow 2010). At that time I had accumulated nearly 30 years of experience as an educator, assisting others in their developmental journeys. Here I shine a light on how I initially came to consider working in the education sector.

Epiphany in a Milk Float

It is the early nineteen eighties, and I am twenty-one, driving an electric milk float through the busy streets of the West End of London, in England. It is a bitterly cold Winter afternoon when darkness descends early. In the queuing traffic, a Black Cab driver winds his window down and asks sardonically, '*Are you f***ing lost, mate?*', and laughs. He is wondering what a milkman is doing driving around so late in the day. He doesn't know I'm a run-out wholesale milkman (I basically deliver things others have forgotten to deliver, or take top-up loads of dairy products to big supermarkets or restaurants). But such a probe, from someone so intimately connected to the streets, is tantamount to questioning my manhood, and the hidden meaning is not lost on me. I can't be bothered to respond, it has been a long day (I still start much earlier than most workers), and the batteries are not just getting flat on the float (funnily enough, I have a recurring dream to this day about desperately trying to get home, in a milk float whose battery power is steadily ebbing away). I make a face that says '*Really*

funny!, but means go forth and multiply, and stare back out at the deepening gloom through a scratched plastic windscreen.

This is my first serious(?) full time job. All I've done apart from this is bar work, briefly managing my cousin's rowdy pub in Camden Town (while he slowly loses a fight with cancer upstairs), where I quickly learnt the art of how to throw nutcases out of the door; and some unlikely work as a film extra in the Greek Islands. A few of my mates have gone into the music industry, and made tentative overtures to me about getting involved in some way in their burgeoning success, and the associated fashion scene. But it's not for me really – seems too pretentious, and transient, and not where my talents lie anyway (where do they?). Plus I've started to drift away from friends anyway (or they have drifted away from me?), as I'm one of the few of us in a serious(?) relationship at such a tender age.

My heavily pregnant girlfriend is living with me at my parent's council flat. It's unanticipated, tense and daunting. I've gone for the only full-time job I could quickly get into, and set about building up some savings for the battles ahead (baby, first home, et cetera). My prospects are not great employment-wise because my school exam results were disappointing. I had gained a scholarship at grammar school, and passed 9 'O' Levels in my mocks. Only to disastrously discover all at the same time nightclubs, recreational drugs, and the opposite sex, all before my finals (only four 'O' Levels realised). Despite something of a recovery at Sixth Form (another 'O' Level and two 'A' Levels), I am underqualified, lacking in confidence, and a bit of a lost cause. I haven't got a clue what I want to do (the careers officer said I could be an archaeologist or a librarian! *Whoopy doo!*), and the social whirl of successively becoming a soul boy, a punk, and a new romantic, have come to an abrupt halt.

Life now seems dull and heavy with responsibility. It feels like the sky is full of clouds so dark they might fall and crush the earth. The world seems to be passing me by. The job is low status. Quite often, I deliver to posh restaurants (by the tradespeople's entrance of course), and once I had to take a single pint of forgotten milk to 10 Downing Street! Strangely, I had to deliver that through the front door – I don't think terrorism was on the radar then. My parents had run a successful pub when I was younger, and had pioneered early pub food, before the local road system altered to ruin their passing trade, and they had been forced into an ignominious retreat to council housing. I had briefly been interested in politics myself, given my success in studying history, but as a surly teenager I had rejected my Mother's pleas to consider going to university to continue studying. Such juxtapositions only served to fuel my sense of isolation and loss.

And so, as the snow starts to dust the windshield, and bitter winds whip the dry flakes around my stiff feet in the doorless cab, I face the darkness that is my potential future and take grim stock. I have done the job for eight months now. I have attacked the milk rounds in all inventive possible ways, explored each feasible route, and experimented with all potential methods of managing the workload. No challenge remains, just a remorseless *more of the same* stretching inexorably into a swallowing future perspective. My donkey jacket stinks of stale milk. I imagine the smell penetrating my skin over the years, becoming an unwanted part of me. *'There has to be something more'*, I say to myself. What am I good at? What else could I do? What do I enjoy? What might be an interesting challenge? I need to think my way out of this.

Slowly positive leads bubble to the surface. I have always loved sport and achieved reasonably well in that. Sport has also been a kind of social lubricant for me, allowing me to mix with different others more easily, and gain status above my working-class roots (Dad had been a coalman before the pub). On reflection, education had done the same. Achieving the grammar school scholarship had been a big deal, and despite me wasting some of my opportunities, I still valued education and could see it as viable means of bettering one's position in society (on reflection I find it interesting that people had developed high hopes for me due to my early educational successes, but were also then very swift to accept that I had blown it, and settled for a more limited life. It was as if such an outcome was always likely for *the likes of me*. A self-fulfilling destiny. Merely an illusion of possibility). I also had found that I liked helping others to improve. And I had some inspiring negative examples from my teachers – I could certainly do better than that! *'You're all going to fail.'* my inebriated history teacher had cruelly announced one afternoon to the 'O' Level class; so, while vulnerable others were crushed around me, I resolved to achieve an A grade. I had already gained some early experience in coaching football with local children, and found it enjoyable but a lot more difficult than I anticipated (a worthy challenge that stimulated my curiosity). I came to a sudden epiphany that I wanted to teach.

Education seemed a win-win, whereby I could (eventually) improve my own and my family's outlook, and potentially make a positive difference in the lives of others. I briefly considered History, but settled quickly on Physical Education as a much sexier subject. My decision did not go down well with those in my immediate circle. They were incredulous – *'You can't do that!' 'You won't get through it!'* Never a good thing to say to me, after the History class incident. They were trying to put out a fire by throwing petrol on it. A small part of me did wonder how the hell I was going to get into and through teacher training in my circumstances (and with my recent track record of study), and recognised the ridiculousness of giving up a well-paid job with

a baby on the way. But for the greater part the batteries were now getting seriously recharged.

Conclusion

The above written fragment was one of the various ways that reflexivity was intertwined in the research process of my Doctoral study on the development of sports coaching expertise. Eventually, in the resulting thesis, reflexive interludes featured in the interstices between the chapters, such that postcards from my life history journey punctuated the research content, and illuminated how who I am interacted with what I was studying. Kathleen Riach (2009) explains that reflexion involves a significant element of critical introspection, a profound examination within oneself, and a kind of meta-reflection (a reflection upon reflection), and authoring pieces, such as the one presented, afforded me a valuable opportunity to dive deeply into reconsidering my relationship with education and expertise development. As I often tell my students, you are not studying a subject, you are studying yourself through a subject.

Epiphany in a Milk Float features my younger self embroiled in instrumental employment that is mundane and already mastered. I needed something more challenging to charge the batteries, and keep them charged. Even if education as a profession has undoubtedly proved to be no smooth ride since then (for instance, I had a knife pulled on me by a pupil on the very first day of my teaching practice placement at university), there are always diverse new challenges, and I love that it is essentially unmasterable (something that also attracted me to the martial arts – hence I was able to disarm the knife wielder safely).

Early on in my teaching career, I received superb advice from an old matriarch who had taken me under her wing about the importance of maintaining my enthusiasm by taking on new challenges and not becoming stale. In a profession where attrition is rife (Craig 2017), the message was to keep dodging the stress and not get stuck in a rut. *'Don't stay anywhere more than five years!'* she said. *'If you haven't achieved what you wanted to by then, and your role hasn't changed, then you probably never will anyway.'* It seemed to make sense to me. I could already appreciate that teaching was hard enough without banging my head against a brick wall.

Later on, in my Doctoral work, I proposed a tentative model of expertise development featuring concentric circles encompassing a comfort zone and a discomfort zone, with lines rippling inwards to constrict the comfort zone (doing less of already mastered tasks), and rippling outwards to expand the discomfort zone (promoting further expertise by exploring the edge of our current capabilities). Being

a milkman constrained me to a static space of stagnation, while becoming an educator presented me with dynamic growth-provoking challenges. I subsequently embarked on a road of self-discovery by taking on different roles, such as head of department, head of year, sports development officer, further education lecturer, higher education lecturer, and coach educator. All learning involves change, and the expert changes often and does not cease in the changing. Expertise development is not promoted by undertaking more of the same, but by engaging with novel and difficult experiences at our developmental limits or in areas that are new to us. In this way, the journey towards expertise may be regarded as one of constantly extending ourselves in order to transcend ourselves.

My epiphany constituted a sudden turning point, a moment of rebirth, and a one-way valve through which I could never return, offering a transformation of identity and possibility. A sense of autonomy abruptly replaced feelings of isolation and loss of potential in rising above limiting circumstances and expectations. Education offered something more, a worthy and varied challenge and a way to better oneself, linked to making a positive difference in supporting others. This reinforces for me that expertise essentially has a service element, in that it is exercised in the service of others, and becomes meaningless and redundant in the absence of a served constituency. Thus, expertise development involves managing both the expectations of ourselves and of others.

To be reflexive is to: ‘...question not only ourselves and our position to the world, but the world itself and what we know about it.’ (Riach 2009, 358-359). My own post-epiphany experiences of a developmental journey towards expertise as an educator, and my professional role in supporting others on their developmental journeys during my career, had clearly influenced my choice of Doctoral research topic. Expertise cultivation involves a long-term and arduous journey requiring invested care and commitment in a chosen area of specialism that one regards as meaningful and stimulating. Having spent much of my working life in education, which I still retained a burning passion for and cared deeply about, my determination to undertake this particular study of expertise development was well fuelled.

Experts are self-motivated, independent, self-reliant beings (Berliner 2001). Even though I experienced dark times in the milk float, when I look back now, I smile. Because in my imagination, the milk float morphs into a rocket launcher that, in an epiphanous moment, propelled a smart ballistic missile, which altered course as it negotiated an unfolding trajectory, and, at the time of writing, has yet to acquire an endpoint. The milk round was a largely predictable route, but education offered turbulence and complexity on a convoluted and never-ending journey of

transformation. To move beyond the ordinary, and to experience discomfort in moving towards the extraordinary. Relinquishing a role no longer promoting growth, to embrace another requiring ongoing adaptation and evolution. Moving forwards (on self-charging batteries this time), driven by a developmental habitus, choosing where best to restrict the comfort zone and to expand the discomfort zone, and, therefore, carving out a unique pathway towards expertise.

*'I will not follow where the path may lead,
but I will go where there is no path,
and I will leave a trail.'*

Muriel Strobe

(Holman, 2010, 201).

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About the Author

Dr David Turner is a Senior Lecturer in Sports Coaching at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, United Kingdom, where he is a member of the Cambridge Centre for Sport and Exercise Sciences. He has been a sports coach and an educator for nearly 40 years. His research interests are centred around expertise and learning in sports coaching and beyond. He is particularly interested in the use of storytelling to derive and represent the wisdom of great coaches, and has an ongoing project of public talks and articles entitled *Learning From Legendary Coaches*.