

## Research Paper

# Autobiography: Inspiring new visions of teacher learning

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## Contextualisation

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to broaden the tradition of autobiography by using it as a way in which teachers can identify sources of inspiration in their educational experience. In the process, my aim is to make explicit the links between autobiography, learning and meta learning. Extending autobiographical inquiry to include different levels at which learning takes place serves to highlight the importance not only of the individual context of learning (the private self), but also the possibility of learning and constructing meaning from autobiography in dialogue with others. This article identifies four levels of learning-how-to-learn from autobiography. These levels are: 1. learning from autobiographical writing; 2. learning through intergenerational dialogues; 3. developmental learning through the career stages; and 4. whole group co-constructive learning.*

*My ultimate goal is two fold. Firstly, to use these levels of learning to identify operational definitions of inspiration based on significant events and experiences in teacher's personal stories. Secondly to identify a meta research orientation for linking autobiography with learning and meta-learning.*

## Introduction

I begin the article by describing a research model which uses autobiography as a starting point from which teachers can begin to identify sources of inspiration in their educational experience. The model develops meta levels of learning from autobiography using different sub-models, learning loops, logs and different autobiographical acts, including intergenerational and co-constructive learning. Within this framework, my intention is to undertake an in-depth study and analysis of the autobiographical stories of inspiration of four teachers, each at different stages in their career development. These stages are: NQT, seven, thirteen and twenty years experience. My ultimate goal is to develop a theory of inspiration based on significant events and experiences in teachers' stories for use in new conceptualisations of teacher learning and professional development. My justification for undertaking such a research I will argue is that in the current climate of performance criteria and league tables, teacher's can become "arrested" in their professional development. Many are being reduced to following a routine and in no way are they being inspired nor are they inspiring others. So we need to ask whether there is some way in which professional development can bring inspiration into teachers' lives. How can we understand inspiration in the context of a teacher's professional development? Autobiography provides the obvious starting point from which individuals can begin to identify sources of inspiration in themselves. Linking autobiography with learning and meta learning provides a further challenge, how to conceptualise learning-how-to-learn from the sources of inspiration that teachers have identified in their autobiographies.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, I present an outline of the model, its different components and give an example of how it is operationalised. Second, I review some of the theoretical arguments which have informed the development of the model, with particular emphasis on the problematic elements involved in carrying out autobiographical research. In the third section, I identify the potential within autobiography to open a space for teachers to

share their personal stories of inspiration and to learn from them. Finally, I review what has been discussed in order to integrate the overall perspective.

## The Model: Learning-how-to-learn from autobiography

The model I am describing identifies four levels of learning-how-to-learn from autobiography. First level learning is from **autobiographical writing**. At this level, I am using the term “autobiographical writing” to describe a story of personal significance. The researcher’s role is to help individuals to identify patterns and themes in the story to reflect on. Second level learning is from **intergenerational dialogues**. At this level of learning, priority is given to exploring how the interaction of teachers of different age groups may influence the meaning and interpretation of inspiration from each other’s autobiographical writing. Third level learning is **developmental learning** through the career stages. This level of learning provides an opportunity for teachers to interpret each others stories of inspiration from a developmental perspective and how the different themes and insights may form a basis for creating new directions for the continued professional growth of the other. The Fourth and highest level of learning is **whole group co-constructive learning**. Co-construction learning involves learning from autobiography in a collaborative group context. The group then becomes the vehicle for learning and developing multiple perspectives on inspiration which transcend individual themes to develop a shared understanding of inspirational principles.

A core component at each level of learning is what I refer to as the LIFT, a process designed to bring together each participant and the researcher in an empowering relationship and ongoing dialogue. LIFT stands for **L**earn, **I**ntegrate, **F**eed-forward and **T**est, which represents the four basic steps of the process.

The first step of the LIFT (see Figure 1) consists of a learning cycle which returns learning into the process at the different levels in order to influence any adjustments which need to be made to previous learning.

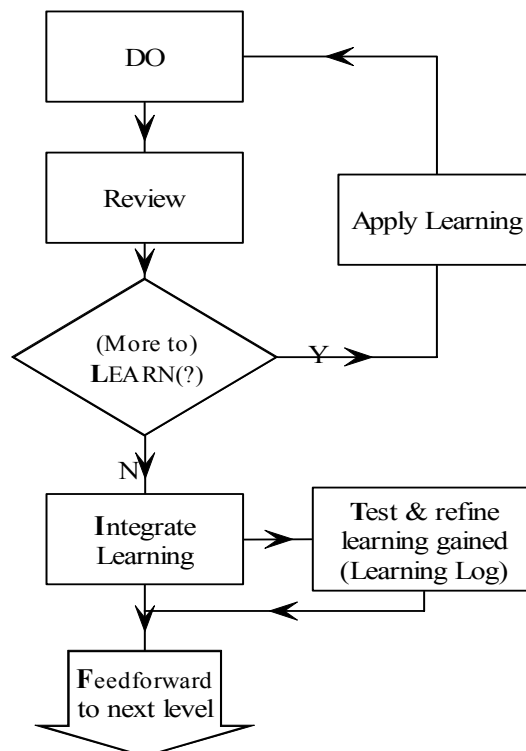


Figure 1. The LIFT process

During the loop, different autobiography acts may be operated, such as journal writing, in order to encourage reflection and so increase the learning. The loop can be operated as many times as the participants and researcher mutually decide is necessary to make connections between past, present and future learning from autobiography. Mutual agreement between researcher and teacher may decide that the participant has gained all s/he needs at each level in order to move to the next level of learning. Such a decision means that a feed-forward process is ready to occur, which first requires the teacher to integrate the learnings gained from one level before moving on to the next level.

Integration of learning is therefore the second step in the LIFT process and in this model incorporates a Test as an evidence procedure that integration of learning has taken place. The Test takes the form of a learning log which aids integration of learning because it is a conscious activity of self review and self improvement (see Figure 2).

Learning Log	Date	Level of Learning
Significant insights:		
What has been learned:		
What is the evidence that the learning has integrated:		
What further actions will I take:		
When:		

**Figure 2.** Example of a learning log.

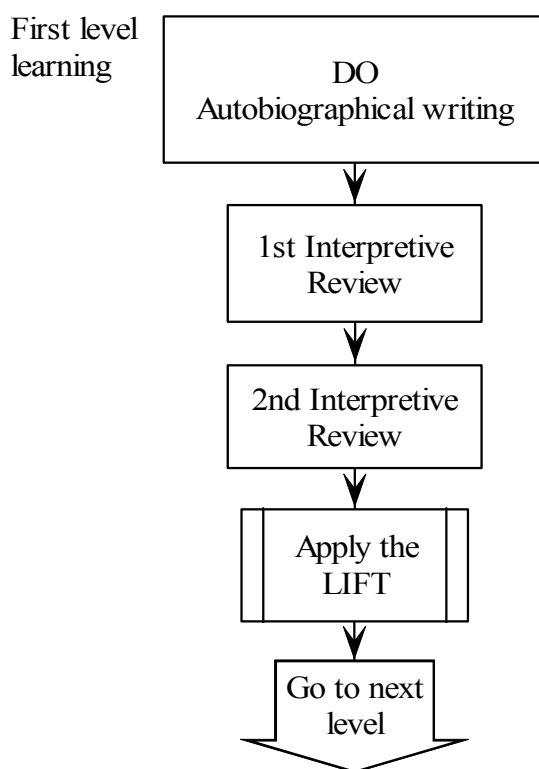
The act of writing a permanent record at each level of learning records the journey and learning experiences en route and gives time for reflections on the significant insights gained throughout the whole process.

During the LIFT process the researcher assumes the role of mentor. In a mentoring role, there is a shift in approach from a formal relationship to the cultivation of a mentoring relationship which includes acting in the best interest of the mentee. Mentor and mentee can examine the significance of revised meanings and new learnings from autobiography and how this may contribute to a larger inspirational story which the teacher mentee is trying to live.

## **Operationalising the Model**

To clarify how the model can be operationalised, I will give an example of how to use the model to develop a teacher's first level learning from autobiography.

The focus of the dialogue at the first level learning is initially on the teacher's autobiographical writing (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Example of the development of a teacher's first level learning from autobiography

I am using autobiographical writing to describe a story of personal experience which is self contained and has its own structure.

During the review conversation the researcher responds to the teacher's story in ways which will extend both the concrete and the abstract sources that the story can offer. The researcher may ask questions about the story and request further information in order to ascertain what may be missing from the text as well as to identify themes for the teacher to reflect on. In this sense the researcher acts like a midwife who uses questions to draw out more information and also to help the teacher identify themes to reflect on. However, the teacher need not respond to any questions which call him/her into territory s/he would rather not tread. It is important that the teacher maintains considerable possession and authority over his/her learning.

Based on what is learned in the review meeting, the researcher encourages the teacher to produce an interpretive text in response to the original autobiographical story for a second review meeting. In this second review (see Figure 3) the researcher asks further questions in order to ascertain what may be missing from the text as well as to identify further patterns and themes for the teacher to reflect on.

The teacher is then encouraged to produce a further text in response to the interpretive text. In this way, personal stories are submitted to the same rigorous interpretive scrutiny as a work of fiction which is informed and shaped by interpretation and where the reading and the revising are as important as the writing. In this sense autobiography becomes an artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to capture a certain phenomenon of life in a descriptive text.

Applying the LIFT at this level may initiate reflexive writing in different forms. The researcher mentor may, for example, encourage the teacher mentee to keep a journal in order to record reflections, thoughts and significant events in the present which have been raised in the

conversations. In order to keep focused on the theme of inspiration whilst journal writing, teachers may choose to ask themselves the following questions on a daily basis:

- What is **my** inspiration?
- What is inspiring me now at this moment in my life?
- How am I being motivated by this inspiration? (Meta question)

Going back again and again to the question of inspiration entices the teacher to begin to “live” the question and even “become” the question until it begins to reveal something of its essential nature. Journal writing and questioning encourages teacher mentees to clarify what their personal story of inspiration means to them in the present.

## **Theoretical underpinnings: autobiography, distinctions and practices**

There are essential differences between autobiography and biography which are often not made clear in the literature. Traditionally, autobiography has been defined as a method of recording a life which captures the essence of a “real” subject or “presence” that exists independently of its textual inscription. The subject is the only authority for the “chain of meaning” in their lives, and this chain is established mainly through memory (Pascal, 1960, p 18). Biography, on the other hand depends on recorded data and as far as possible checks all subjective memories against records, often in fact rectifying faulty recollections. In an autobiography, memory can be trusted because autobiography is not just reconstruction of the past, but an interpretation of it. The significant thing is that the subject can remember events in his or her past and can make a judgment on the past within the framework of the present. Stanley (1993), makes this distinction clear by succinctly describing autobiography on the one hand as “writing the life of one’s self and biography on the other hand, as “writing the life of another”. The concept of autobiography can also be distinguished from philosophical reflection on the self, static analysis, and the self portrait Pascal (1960). What is common to all these methods is the attempt, by means of introspection and reflection, at a static representation of the self. Autobiography, on the contrary, and as traditionally conceived, is both historical in its method, and at the same time a representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world.

The autobiographical approach has achieved considerable prominence in educational practice. It has been deployed in sociological, curricular and transformative pedagogical practices and has been shown to be ideally suited to revealing experienced based learning and in tracking the development of self-as-learner. In language education, the work of James Britton (1970; 1981) focuses on student’s construction of autobiographical narratives as an indispensable component of personal, expressive writing. Autobiography has also been used in teacher preparation courses (Abbs, 1976; Grumet, 1976; 1978; 1981) where students are asked to reflect on and write about their personal and educational experiences in order to gain deeper knowledge of the kinds of influences likely to affect their present and future abilities as teachers. For Abbs (1976), the act of writing an autobiography which reflects on the students’ experiences of education will, he says, “reveal the intimate relationship between being and knowing, between existence and education, between self and culture” (p 148). For Grumet (1976), however, the ultimate significance of the personal narratives which emerge from autobiography is not found in their existence as pieces of paper, as ends in themselves, but rather as precipitates of a developmental process in which the telling, the reading and the revising are of the utmost importance. From a somewhat different perspective, Marxist scholars have asked teachers to “examine their own histories, those connections to the past which in part define who and how they mediate and function in the world” (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985, p 160).

## Post-structuralist and humanistic views on autobiography

Inevitably, themes in postmodern epistemology need to be addressed in work on autobiography. One of the problematic elements concerns the assumption that a life or past experience can be captured and represented in a text “as it really is or was” has been increasingly questioned by post-structuralist contributors. Denzin (1989, p 14), for example, argues that the central character of an autobiography is language and more particularly writing and production of text. Since, it is argued, subjects can only represent themselves in language by creating a “literary rather than a literal” figure, an experience or identity is not fixed prior to language, but is constituted by the “play” of language. Autobiography therefore does not record a life nor capture the essence of a “real” subject that exists independently of its textual inscription. The subject of the autobiography exists or comes into being because of the act of inscription.

In autobiography’s dominant humanistic discourse, however, it is the authorial and authoritative voice that tells it “as it is and was”, which is privileged. Graham (1993) points out when markers of an authentic presence are absent, texts appear detached and “unreal”. He goes on to argue, and in my view rightly, that it is the very textuality of autobiography, that is not simply a life as experienced but a life understood and represented in a text that foregrounds “presence” and thereby conceals textuality. Thus although autobiography is always writing in a narrow sense, it actually works like speech in guaranteeing the authenticity of a human presence.

The view I have taken for the purposes of my study is that, whereas it is acknowledged that a text is a material object, a piece of paper with marks upon it, its real importance is that it gives access to a reality beyond itself. To call this into question by reducing everything to “fiction” is to call the authenticity, honesty and accuracy of a person’s “voice” and genuine desire to understand their educational experiences into question. Telling the story of the self, as autobiography does, always assumes a certain kind of subject -what I shall call the “self of the story”. In the self story meaning is there, or more accurately “in here”, waiting to be discovered or unveiled in the writing, the reading and the revising of the story. Furthermore, there is support in the literature for the thesis that there is an experiencing consciousness capable of anticipating, attending and remembering (Crites, 1971). Crites refers to this consciousness as “memory” and argues that without memory, experience would have no coherence at all. Consciousness would be locked in a bare, momentary present, ie, in a disconnected succession of perceptions which it would have no power to relate to one another (*ibid*, p 298). Memory functions by preserving images drawn from experience and it constitutes a kind of lasting chronicle of the temporal course of an individual’s experience. This chronicle does not need to be recollected strictly, but merely recalled. Remembering becomes knowing when experience is recollected through telling a story. Crites writes:

‘...the story is never simply the tedious and unilluminating recital of the chronicle of memory itself. And of course I can manipulate the image-stream in many ways. I can abstract general features and formal elements of it for purposes of theory, or suspend it in order to draw a picture, or place episodes from it in a way that gives them new significance’. (p 300)

To summarise what has been learned so far. The main claims for autobiography in relation to this research are, firstly, that it is a methodology which recognises the value of individual experience. To be autobiographical, however, the individual must have a self reflexive awareness of a lived reality, or past presence and a sense of possessing this reality as belonging to self. It is through the processes of remembering, consulting memory, writing and revising, that experiences are recalled from memory and become known as a personal story. The aim of autobiography, therefore, is to transform a personal story into its textual expression in such a way that the effect of the text is a reliving of something meaningful for

the individual and through the reading, animates the reader to make connections to his or her own experience. In the sections which follow, I turn to the question of how an understanding of “autobiographical consciousness” and “collaborative autobiographical acts” can be used to inform research using autobiography.

## **Autobiographical consciousness and the ideas of William Pinar**

In his two essays on the relationship of life history to educational experience, William Pinar (1981; 1986) argues that the justification for autobiography depends upon its ability to reveal meaning in educational experience and its ability as a research tool to help explore a dialectic between past experiences and present and future actions. The explicit links to learning that can be made using this model of autobiography is on accessing a teacher’s deeper knowledge, learning and understanding of significant inspirational events. To become educational experience, however, use needs be made of this knowledge in order to transform present and future actions. To do this requires a process of reflection and learning from that experience. Pinar further argued that to choose to use autobiography requires a prior recognition and acknowledgment of three main issues. First, that an individual can become “arrested” or so identified with their social roles that they have given up their own “voice”. Second, in order to bring about movement from self knowledge purely in terms of social roles, autobiography can be used as a way to create a dialectic between past, present and future experiences, thereby creating a consciousness capable of intellectual movement and fluidity of mind. The third issue is the acceptance of time as meaning “lived” time as opposed to our more conventional understanding of time as a succession of “now” moments, an understanding powerfully shaped by the model of clock time. The succession model constructs the past as the “has been” and the future as the “yet to be”. “Lived” time involves the interfolding of all three temporal moments of past, present and future - the past and the future are always present. Crites (1971) conceptualises this as a threefold function of the mind or experiencing consciousness which “anticipates and attends and remembers, so that what it anticipates passes through what it attends into what it remembers” (*Ibid*: p 298).

The autobiographical consciousness which makes explicit the dialectic between past, present and future moves below the surface of memory, requiring the dismantling of self defenses in order to retrieve sensory experiences. In so doing it does not just portray the past from the point of view of the present, instead it allows (to a variable extent) a re-entry into the past, a re-experience of past events. Autobiographical recall and writing are tools which can help to capture the texture and rhythm of this subjective consciousness or self knowledge (Pinar, 1986, p 28).

To summarise, the main points of Pinar’s arguments which can be used to inform an analysis of teachers’ stories are: 1. that there is a form of autobiographical consciousness that evolves from subjective experience which can reveal the thematic connections between past, present and future so that one comes to see the themes that endure and require honoring; 2. Autobiographical inquiry can be used as a tool to recover this form of consciousness by allowing a person to go into a lived experience in the past, present or future moment; 3. Such a strategy requires that teachers are given opportunities to make explicit their subjective or internal experiences of an event through freely associating back into the event in order to recall the multidimensional reality (visual, tactile, mental, emotional) that is present and the meanings attributed to those experiences; 4. Recording everything that happens while recalling subjective experience cultivates a certain relation to knowledge and knowing where learning becomes emancipatory because it results in seeing oneself in different ways. Such a record also becomes useful as a preliminary tool for teachers to use to frame their present and future goals, purposes, feelings and contexts in addition to tracing how their thinking is developing, which is important in forging ongoing professional development.

One of the main dangers of such a strategy, however, is that autobiographies of personal educational experiences may end up being written purely for their own sake, without regard to the developmental consequences of the writers. This could result in “the potentially emancipatory process becoming reified as the words become taken for the things themselves” (Pinar, 1981, p 173). My argument, however, is that if such a strategy is linked to learning, then the consequences would be opportunities to apply new learnings at a meta level (learning-how-to-learn from experience).

## **Collaborative autobiographical Acts and the ideas of Harold Rosen**

The term collaborative autobiography is a relatively new concept within the tradition of autobiography. The work and ideas of Harold Rosen (1998) are perhaps best known for drawing attention to this and also to the fact that autobiographical activity includes many oral forms in addition to the “graph” of autobiography. For example, in many traditional cultures the power of intergenerational dialogues is used as a way to bring young and old together in order to see the best in one another’s life experience and histories. Having two or more people collaboratively construct shared meanings constitutes a relationship, a sharing and interpenetration of each other’s spheres of experience. Dialogue between two or more people also increases the range of responses and gives a broader perspective in which to view each other’s learning.

Rosen (1998) identifies and distinguishes between three types of collaborative autobiographical acts which promote collaborative learning through oral autobiography. First, is the kind which occurs in spontaneous conversations in which two people join forces to recount an episode from a shared past. A second type is the collaboration in which one person sets out to elicit from another a life story or part of it. A third kind of collaborative autobiographical activity occurs in groups which have deliberately been organised to create a space, to speak of and therefore to tape record and/or write about the past. They stand in strong contrast to the “exemplary life” tradition and take a higher level of practice than can be found as a spontaneous occurrence in families, friendship groups, reunions and the like. Such group collaboration has a promise of transforming “ephemeral, fortuitous and fragmentary voices into texts available for dissemination and thus entering to the public domain” (*ibid*, p 14).

## **Conclusion**

I have set out so far in this article to explore ideas from which to develop a wider perspective on how different levels of learning can occur from undertaking work in autobiography. One of the outcomes I have found from undertaking autobiographical inquiry is that it has forced me to reconsider different ways that teachers can learn from their experiences. The current focus on learning in teacher development programmes (as simply a change in behaviour or performance) has distracted attention away from the possibility of a much richer perspective of what may, for the teacher, count as significant learning and educational experience. Using all the learnings I have gained from my inquiry into autobiography has enabled me to design a model for use in my research which both extends the inquiry and provides ways of thinking about levels of learning-how-to-learn from autobiography. In addition, I have incorporated learning from my own observations, experiences and practice of mentoring teachers at different stages in their career development.

Meta learning, in the sense that I am using the term in this study, describes a complex process of learning involving different levels at which learning takes place, different sub-models, learning loops and processes to test the integration of learning. Incorporating intergenerational and co-constructive group learning with stories of personal learning promotes the importance of both the individual context of learning (the private self) and also the process of constructing meaning in dialogue with others.



My ultimate aim is to identify operational definitions of inspiration based on significant experiences in teachers' stories at each of the different levels of learning. Findings are still in the process of being analysed so cannot be reported in this article, however any input or contributions on the proposed model from readers is welcomed by the researcher.

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