

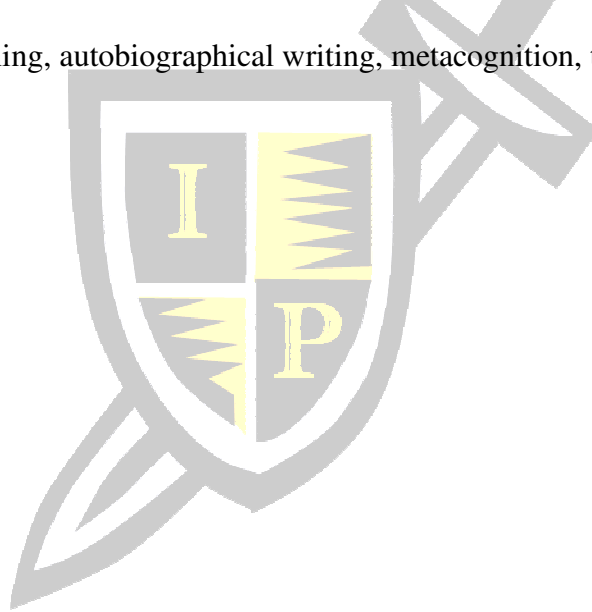
Using Autobiographical Writing as a Metacognitive Approach to Teacher Development

Olivia Modesto
Texas A&M University, Kingsville

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of autobiographical writing as a metacognitive approach to develop and deepen teachers' professional learning that is not commonly addressed in traditional modes of professional development activities. The author reviewed previous investigations regarding the use of autobiographies in the context of adult and teacher learning. Likewise, she reviewed metacognitive theory to examine how it related to autobiographical writing. The author found that aspects of autobiographical writing engendered self-awareness, and reflection intersected with metacognition. Writing prompts are included to encourage teachers to reflect on their experiences and serve as springboards for writing their own autobiographies.

Keywords: teacher learning, autobiographical writing, metacognition, teacher autobiography, reflection



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INTRODUCTION

For two and a half years, Kyoko lived in a relocation camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming, between 1942 to 1944. She was called an evacuee, not as a victim fleeing from a dire act of God like a flood or a tornado, but by an act of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order Number 066. This decree ordered the incarceration of persons with Japanese ancestry. The intent of this order was to secure the West Coast from secrets being sent to Japan, but the more subtle reason was that a growing number of immigrant farmers had begun to purchase properties in California. Because they looked like the enemies, Kyoko Sato and her family were forced to live in what she called a concentration camp, losing their thriving business at Grand Central market in downtown Los Angeles and their new home (Sato, 2007).

Today, Dr. Kyoko Sato is an English educator at the California State University at Northridge and past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). She narrated her experiences as a child who lived in a society hostile to her identity in her presidential address in the 2006 NCTE annual convention. Her narration served as a lens and as a background through which she discussed the struggles of people of unique ethnicities in today's educational system. She proceeded by questioning her teacher audience on how they honor their students' unique languages and cultures (Sato, 2007). Her experiences, as expressed in her autobiographical retelling, gave meaning to her advocacy as a teacher for English language learners (Johnson, 2003). This article makes a case for using autobiographical writing as a promising tool to develop teacher learning. The presidential address made by Sato is an example of the depth of meaning that may result in revisiting one's experiences.

Inspiration for Inquiry

Fairbanks et al (2010) postulated that traditional ideas of professional knowledge are not enough to make teachers "thoughtfully adaptive", that is, to become sensitive to students and situations (p. 161). They argued that knowing what and how to teach is not sufficient to make one's teaching thoughtful. For them, knowing one's self with the intent of blending personal and professional experiences to aid professional growth is as important as or even more important than traditional ideas of professional knowledge. Similarly, Cole and Knowles (2000) contended traditional perspectives on teacher development which tend to diminish the role of teachers' individuality and complexity as learners. For them, growth entails more than performance diagnosis that is reflected in the deficit and delivery model of professional development. They proposed that this be supplemented by more meaningful initiatives that reflect teachers' identities, a model that fosters self-questioning and reflection.

In view of the discussion regarding the insufficiency of traditional forms of teacher knowledge, it is important to note that in a report published by the National Staff Development Council, American teachers stated that much of the professional development activities available to them are not useful. Moreover, effective professional development characterized by high-intensity, job-embedded, collaborative learning does not occur in most states, districts, and schools in the United States. (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). There is a need to address this problem. Though there are increasing and diverse opportunities to engage in deepened professional learning such as taking part in professional learning communities (Liebermann & Mace, 2008), school community teams (National Council on Teaching and America's Future, 2009), and even in social networking systems (Liebermann & Mace, 2010),

this author examines a less prominent, yet may be a potent approach, to teachers' professional development similar to what Sato (2007) exhibited in using her experience to bring depth to her perspective on cultural barriers to education. In this article, the author investigated how autobiographical writing may contribute to teachers' metacognitive development that may lead to deep professional learning.

Inquiry Statement

The underlying purpose of this study is to inquire about the implications of autobiographical writing as a metacognitive approach to teachers' professional development by examining related literature. Specifically, this author would like to answer the following questions: (a) How can autobiographical writing help teachers develop personally and professionally? (b) What aspects of autobiographical writing can be linked to metacognition? (c) How can autobiographical writing be used to aid in teachers' learning? This study seeks to contribute to teacher development research geared towards making professional learning personally meaningful.

EVIDENCE FROM LITERATURE

Autobiography as Inquiry

To tell a story is a natural human act, and to study humans, it is necessary to study their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This idea reinforces a perspective that education is a process of making and remaking, telling and retelling of stories. Cole and Knowles (2000) viewed this process as reflexive autobiographical inquiry, which implies that to teach is to tell one's stories.

Teacher development occurs "along a continuum beginning well before entry into formal programs of teacher education and continuing through formal preparation, into the early years of teaching, and through experience practice to retirement" (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p.1). Bauman (2002) considered the writing of one's autobiography as a search for self-knowledge. Teachers, learners, and researchers are the protagonists and narrators of the educational narrative (Conle, 2003; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Teachers' life histories are useful in understanding teachers' philosophies, values, beliefs, and interests that influence action (Cole & Knowles, 1990). In a two-year professional development master's degree program designed by Shockley, Bond, and Rollins (2008) called Initiatives in Educational Transformation, teachers were asked to write about classroom experiences. Some examples of prompts were: "Write about a time you felt inadequate as a teacher" and "Write an essay to a stranger explaining how they might understand you as a person and as a teacher" (p. 190). The purpose of this activity was to help teachers understand that self-awareness is a way of honoring the self and is a significant step towards making explicit their hidden curricula (Shockley, Bond, & Rollins, 2008). Similarly, Grumet (1989) conceived of this notion when she asserted that autobiographical writing is an invitation for teachers to express the process they engage in to become participants in the world, to encode their thoughts so that they can retell their stories and enable them to determine how they are similar or different from others. In the same vein, Galindo and Olguin (1996) examined the role of autobiographical writing as a medium through which cultural knowledge of bilingual teachers might be accessed

and how such knowledge might be integrated into their teaching philosophies. They concluded that writing autobiographies played an important part in strengthening bilingual educators' identities that led to a better understanding of their own bilingual students.

Further, Karpiak (2003) explored the varying depth of selected autobiographies of adult learners. Using a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, she categorized learners' autobiographies as "ethnographic, reflective, and uncanny" (p. 99). The ethnographic telling refers to the adult learners' detailing of life experiences concerned with capturing details. The reflective telling depicts deeper probing of meanings behind life experiences, and finally, the uncanny surfaces the learners' reliving and acceptance of painful experiences that lead to personal emancipation. Karpiak (2003) described the autobiographical writing that adult learners do as a process of personal reflection and meaning making. Resembling this thought on personal development, Ershler (2001) used a narrative methodology in helping novice teachers make sense of classroom events and to help them build their sense of agency. In the class she taught entitled, *Inquiry into the Teaching Process: Practice into Theory*, teachers are asked to write and share narratives of their classroom experiences. The intention of this narrative approach to teacher learning is to achieve "greater clarity...in (teachers') thinking, a stronger sense of professional identity, a clearer understanding of the role and importance of learning and teaching, and an enhanced sense of their own place in their teaching" (Ershler, 2001, p. 173). The processes of writing and sharing give teachers the opportunity to focus on the details that make up the rapid events of their classroom lives.

Outside the education field, researchers have investigated the use of autobiographies. Tobert and Fisher (1992), in their study of managers' comparisons of their key life events to a developmental framework using autobiographies, discovered that autobiographical writing is a process that develops self-recognition of how life experiences influence managerial style. In the field of social work, Craig (2007) explored the use of personal narratives as a method of conveying a richer and deeper understanding of social workers' roles. She concluded that the personal narrative may be used as a tool for advocacy for social workers and their clients.

Metacognitive Theory

Metacognition is the process of knowing and manipulating one's own thoughts, memory, and understanding (Flavell, 1979). Nelson (1996) theorized that thinking and thinking about thinking can simultaneously occur. Everyday people rely on their metacognition, but this often goes unnoticed (Kornell, 2009). Metacognition has three components: metacognitive experiences, metacognitive knowledge, and metacognitive skills (Efklides, 2008). Metacognitive experiences are related to feelings of knowing, feelings of familiarity, feelings of difficulty, feelings of confidence, feelings of satisfaction, and estimate of effort. Metacognitive knowledge refers to what people know about thinking, including memory and language, while metacognitive skills refer to the intentional planning, monitoring, and evaluating thinking.

Research on the application of metacognitive theory to education abounds (American Psychological Association, 1997). Investigation has been conducted in the areas of school learning such as reading and vocabulary development (Byrd & Gholson, 1985; Cross & Paris, 1988; Cubucku, 2008; Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1988), study skills and learning strategies (Bannert & Mengelkamp, 2008; Conner, 2008; Holtzman, 2008), second language learning

(Goh & Lin, 1999; O' Malley & Chamot, 1989), assessment (Young & Fry, 2008), and writing (Magno, 2008). This review is not in any way exhaustive but demonstrates the extent metacognitive theory has been applied in education.

Metacognition is also highly related to self-regulation (Efklides, 2008). People are capable of being aware of their emotional states and can deliberately ignore what they feel if it is not in alignment with reason or their goals. It develops in childhood through children's interaction with significant others and continues through the life span (Efklides, 2008). Flavell (1979) considered metacognition as a means to develop the ability to make good decisions. In a similar vein, Dulonsky and Metcalfe (2009) reinforced this idea in stating that the strong link of metacognition to self-awareness and self-reflection "places it at the pinnacle of personal growth" (p.19). Thus, metacognitive theory is useful in understanding the ways people can become adaptive, thoughtful, and self-controlled.

Critical Analysis: Intersection of Autobiography and Metacognition

Researchers have been able to show the benefits of using autobiographical writing to develop personally and professionally. Most of these studies were done in the context of adult and teacher education in an effort to engender transformative learning (Clark & Rossiter, 2006; Johnson, 2003; Karpiak, 2003). The use of autobiographical writing was shown to benefit teachers' professional learning by enabling teachers to self-examine, which bears significance in raising awareness about one's teaching philosophies and values that influence classroom teaching practices (Cole & Knowles, 2000; Ershler, 2001; Galindo & Olguin, 1996; Shockley, Bond, & Rollins, 2008). It is at this point that autobiographical writing may be viewed as a metacognitive tool for professional learning since metacognitive theory is highly correlated to people's self-regulatory functions. By thoughtfully and intentionally writing about one's experiences, one employs metacognitive processes (Grumet, 1989). Despite the benefits of using autobiographical writing as a method for personal and professional growth, this path towards professional growth is difficult to empirically validate (Solas, 1992). Autobiographical writing is just one way to achieve reflective and critical thought. The mere telling of one's stories does not constitute metacognition. The retelling must be accompanied by effective reflection (Loughran, 2002).

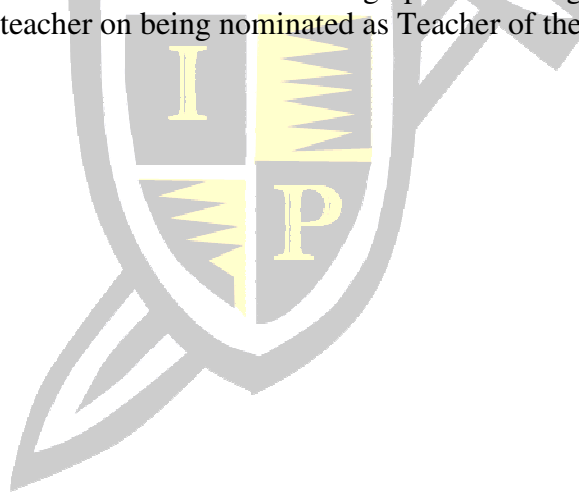
CONCLUSION

Autobiographical writing bears implication to teachers' professional learning. There is evidence that supports the benefits of writing autobiographies in fostering teachers' self-awareness, knowledge, and identity (Solas, 1992). It is a way to self-understanding and personal growth. It is linked to teachers' metacognitive development because it fosters self-reflection and re-examination of life experiences. Though autobiographical writing may be done anytime, informally, outside the territory of formal professional development programs, further research is recommended to explore how it may be incorporated formally and regularly in teachers' professional development agenda.

This author realized that to write about one's self requires courage. Prose (2006), a fiction writer and a professor of writing, captured this sentiment in saying that “the fear of writing badly, of revealing something you would rather keep hidden, of losing the good opinion of the world, of violating your own high standards, or of discovering something about yourself that you would just as soon not know—those are just a few phantoms scary enough to make the writer wonder if there might be a job available washing skyscraper windows” (pp. 249-250). Nevertheless, almost always, writing allows this author to conquer new and vast territories of her intellect. For this particular article, this author took the risk of telling her own story—a risk well worth taking because it has given her a better understanding of her own identity as an educator (Appendix B).

APPLICATION

Cole and Knowles (2000) outlined the benefits of autobiographical inquiry into four categories: (a) gaining insights about self as a developing professional, (b) recording one's professional development, (c) enhancing learning, and (d) examining practices and developing theories in sustaining professional development. Based on the results of this investigation of the literature, the author presented guidelines that teachers might use for autobiographical writing. The writing prompts and procedures encourage teachers to converse with the self (See Appendix A). In addition, the author included her brief autobiographical writing, which was written when she was a public school teacher on being nominated as Teacher of the Year in her school district (See Appendix B).

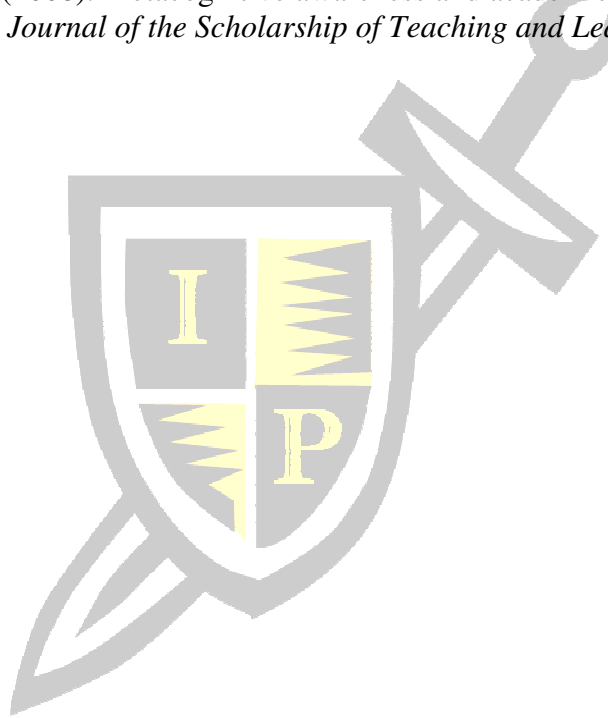


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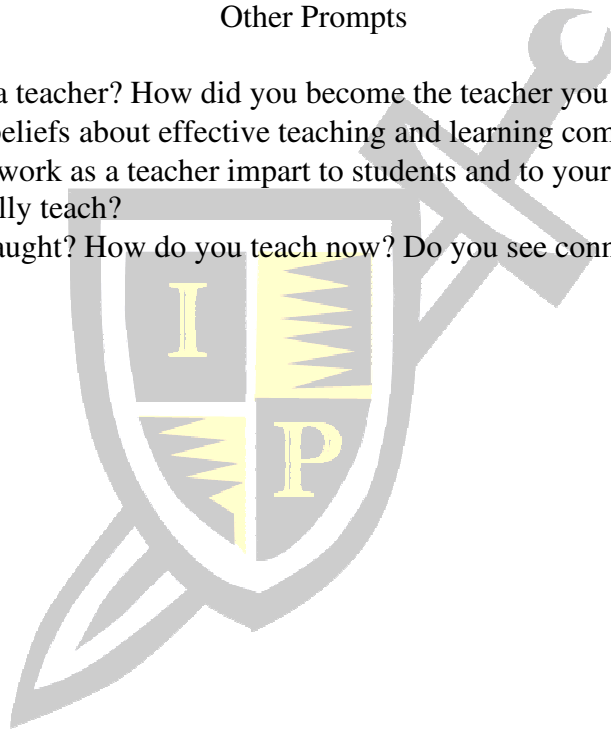
APPENDIX A

Guidelines for Teachers' Autobiographical Writing

- Imagine that a publisher has invited you to write your story of becoming a teacher in three chapters; what would the titles be?
- To guide your work, prepare an outline with the titles.
- You may seek out a metaphor or a central theme that runs throughout your story.
- You may use a simple chronology of your life.
- Choose a title for your story.
- Reflect on your life, take something from this exercise—what is your story as a teacher? as a learner? What is your work as a teacher all about?

Other Prompts

- Who are you as a teacher? How did you become the teacher you are today?
- Where do your beliefs about effective teaching and learning come from?
- What does your work as a teacher impart to students and to your school community? What do you really teach?
- How were you taught? How do you teach now? Do you see connections between these two?



APPENDIX B

An English Teacher's Story

I am not a scientist who makes discoveries and advance cutting edge technology. I am a teacher. I discover a child's wonder as he/she learns things he/she has never known before. I am not a doctor who can help heal the sick or rescue the dying. I am a teacher. I help the struggling reader survive and thrive in the academic world. I am not an artist whose genius can create timeless beauty. I am a teacher. I see beauty in students who dare to dream despite the immense personal challenges they have to overcome. I am not an engineer who can build structures that can last for more than a lifetime. I am a teacher. I build a bridge from the known to the unknown, helping my students cross from the path of their present potentials to the road of their limitless possibilities.

Teaching is not just what I do. It is primarily what I have become. It is hard for me to delineate who I am as a person from what I love to do every day—teach. This, I think, is who I really am: I love what I do, and I show my students that I truly care about how and what they learn in my classroom. Teaching is primarily a communicative act, and in any form of communication, there is a medium and a message. I believe that a teacher's life, attitudes, manners, and speech serve as the medium for an important message. The one message I want my students to remember is that they can learn and succeed if we work together and if they apply themselves to the tasks required of them to learn. I believe in what Henry David Thoreau said, "There is no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor". A teacher's role is to help a student elevate him/herself by providing engaging content and activities that make learning meaningful and authentic.

How did I become the teacher I am today? I grew up in a family of teachers. Four of my aunts were teachers. I grew up seeing them grade papers, write lesson plans, and create visual aids. I would hear them talk about their students, their complaints, their humorous stories of classroom incidents, their joys and frustrations. Their work fascinated me, and they have gained my utmost respect. However, as a little girl, I was more fascinated by the world, so I wanted to be a flight stewardess because, living in a Third World country, I thought that was the surest way to see the world. As I grew a little older, I thought of becoming a journalist, so I could write about the world. However, my spiritual renewal as a Christian when I was a teenager fostered my desire not just to see the world or write about the world—I wanted to change the world. When I was given a chance in senior high school to be the teacher of the day in my history class, I discovered that when I shared my knowledge and skills, I had a chance to be heard and to make a contribution to other people's learning.

I may be called an idealistic fool. I possess a worn out copy of the lyrics of *The Impossible Dream* from the movie version of *Don Quixote*, which my high school English teacher taught me. Whenever I am faced with a struggle or a roadblock regarding students who are facing severe challenges in their lives that hinder their academic progress, I still sing these words in my heart: "To try, when your arms are too weary...to reach the unreachable star...This is my quest, to follow the star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far, to fight for the right, without question or pause..." I connect Don Quixote's idealism to my aspiration as a teacher. I want to help young people realize their dreams, even if sometimes, this seems impossible. Every day of my life I have the honor to do this.

At the age of nineteen, I had already begun formally teaching English as a second language in my home country, the Philippines. I have always wanted to learn this beautiful language. When I was a little girl, I wondered why Americans know English while a Filipina like me did not. This wondering has been the quest of my life as a student, which influenced me to specialize in English language teaching both in my bachelor's and master's programs. In elementary and high school, I have had teachers who instructed me strongly in grammar. I enjoyed doing written grammatical exercises as one enjoyed playing video games. I pretended to be a newscaster to imitate the sounds of native language speakers because I love the sound of English. Until now, I do not know where this love originated. I do not want to believe it is a result of colonial mentality, but I would like to believe it is God-given and ordained, for today, I live in America and a teacher of English to native and nonnative speakers alike. I have been able to share to my English language learners that I am just like them, a learner of the language. They will never see me laugh at their mistakes, belittle their challenges, or find their accents strange. This attitude has given me the advantage of being able to build strong rapport with my students.

Here in America, my childhood dreams have come true...to own a home, to drive a car, to travel by plane and to see so many unique places, to see my four children attend school for free, which in my home country would be considered a school for the privileged or the elite. I am here in America because I qualified to teach the language I love. It did not matter where I came from or how I look like, but because I teach English, I am here. The language I love has loved me back.

I have been teaching for 19 years now, and I will devote the next 19 years of my life to the same profession. Just recently, I received an email from a parent of one of my former preschool students. She told me that my former student is now number one in his graduating class. She was attributing his success to the foundation I had laid in his life when he was just six years old. When I think of how my former students have become teachers themselves, doctors, nurses, engineers, and much more, I am humbled to know I had once been part of their lives.