

The 'written self': writing and storytelling as a teaching and learning tool for creative and personal development

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the purpose of telling our stories within an academic framework, as educators, as students and as 'creatives'. By referring to the creative arts, this paper considers the value of storytelling as a teaching and learning tool. Telling stories through writing, aids the students in finding and developing their voice and 'written self' that allows for reflection and contextualisation of the self. It unpacks how our personal narratives bring a nuanced and more relevant understanding of our own, and our students' social and historical context. It enables us to articulate, document, contextualise and reflect on our creative process, creative practice as well as our creative and personal development.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the benefit of writing and telling our stories as a teaching and learning tool in tertiary education and creative practices. It explores the notion of the 'written self' within various forms of writing, and how this contributes to the understanding and unpacking of our identities. Further to this, the paper explores how telling our stories assists us to contextualise our social and historical background and personal history. It investigates the purpose and meaning of writing as a concept and how this concept promotes various forms of self-expression and self-exploration; providing a platform that encourages self-reflection and reflexivity that enables us to contextualise our 'written selves'. The paper also illustrates how this encourages a greater acceptance and reception to creative writing and with further development, a reception to academic writing.

IDENTIFYING A 'WRITTEN SELF' THROUGH WRITING AND STORYTELLING

Developing an in-depth understanding of my creative practice and examining my identity as a white Afrikaans speaking female who was raised as a conservative Calvinist, is an integral part of my profession as educator and artist. This journey of awareness explores my memories as a method to understand and contextualise my identity, personal history and as a means to understanding the meaning behind my artwork. In this process, writing is employed as a methodology for exploring memories and identity. By writing, I refer to a broader concept of writing; a method of leaving a mark, as a trace or as a text. Writing is a text that communicates through symbols or signifiers that are recognized by the reader; this recognition being dependent on the readers' frame of reference and positioning within a social and literacy context. To understand the notion of writing as a means of communication or as a form of expression, we must consider the various forms it takes such as writing on the landscape (for example the rich history of Stonehenge or act of tracking an animal), writing through architecture (for example the

Taj Mahal palace as a symbol or story of love), writing with words (the linguistic use of text), writing with visuals (referring to moving or still images) and writing with sound (for example music).¹

This concept of writing and the application of creative and diverse styles or genres of writing such as journals, poetry or narrative is recommended by Creme (2003) as having a positive effect on students. Creme (2003: 275) explains that 'we have found that a different genre sometimes enables them to get to the heart of an issue... they haven't been afraid to play – that is, to make their own mark through their own choice of words, image or structure'. The notion of the 'written self' does not necessarily refer to the 'real self' as a socially constructed identity, but rather as an experience to establish a sense of self, 'an authentic sense of one's own "voice" on the page... and inner presence that has more to do with feeling than thinking... any kind of writing is an opportunity for bringing more of our self to being' (Creme & Hunt, 2002: 152).

Further to this, James (2004) argues that writing about the self and its experiences, creates a 'written self' developing the researcher or students' voice. The act of writing for and about the self, enables the researcher to distance herself from the audience or reader, and allows the writer to consume herself with the subject matter (the self or personal history); this allows the expression of experiences and feelings, drawing on memory and to articulate ideas. Writing for the self allows the personal development to meet academic development if one reflects on the written work and by doing so approaches it from an analytical and critical perspective to contextualise the writing or 'written self'. James (2004: 106) continues to explain that for the creative mind to engage successfully with this process, the participant should create 'something aesthetic or significant in terms of how life experiences are interpreted... at the heart of the creative arts, is the development of a sense of self; one's personal identity or myth, as it relates to the creative practices and persona of the maker'.

To illustrate the notion of the 'written self', I will refer to my presentation at a recent conference for the Independent Afrikaans Examinations Board for private high schools in South Africa where they reviewed the curriculum for Afrikaans as a second language. My role as guest speaker was to inspire educators about the prospect of Afrikaans as a creative language. The presentation addressed the benefit of telling our stories as an educational, self-reflective and creative tool. The purpose of telling my story was to illustrate the ways in which a story can be told, that telling stories is a form of self-expression and self-representation. By applying self-reflection one can then contextualise the story within a particular social and historical context.

The creative process took on four forms of the 'written self':

- The first was a freethinking and intuitive process where I started a free-writing exercise by writing down my life story and memories without restraint. This took the form of the uninhibited and intuitive representation and unfolding of the self.
- The second was to construct a visual narrative of my life story in a PowerPoint presentation. This consisted of family photographs, memorabilia and personal documents and took the form of the self as visual narrative.
- The third was to write my personal narrative in Afrikaans, my mother tongue, relating to the visual presentation by providing a creatively written narrative that was contextualized within a social and historical context. This took the form of the self as Afrikaans expressed in a textual narrative.

¹ The understanding was illustrated by my supervisor, Profesor Joan Conolly, in a conversation we had on 20 February 2008.

- The fourth and final part was performing as an Afrikaans speaking presenter, presenting my story verbally and visually in Afrikaans to an Afrikaans audience. This took the form of the self as performer and as an Afrikaans-speaking educator presenting to an 'informed' Afrikaans-speaking audience, with a feeling of anxiety about their evaluation and interpretation.

Considering the four identities; the creative and intuitive freethinker, the visual narrator, the contextualised Afrikaans writer and the educated Afrikaans-speaking presenter, illustrates that each 'written self' took on a different form or means of expression. They each had a different role, personality and purpose by taking on a distinct position within the construction and telling of the story, and by that embedded different meanings. Creme & Hunt (2002) compare two genres in writing to demonstrate the notion of the 'written self'. They (2002: 162) explain: 'The writing identity that the writer assumes while writing in a particular genre is also informed by the different models of the person... If the university essay sets up a writing subject as "rational knower", creative writing calls up ideas of the writer as fiction-maker or image-maker'. In the preparation of my presentation, each section required a different mode of thinking and different kind of writing. My identity as writer (or the 'written self') transformed based on the genre or purpose of the narrative.

According to Bamberg (2004: 135), telling stories is a conscious act of constructing the narrative considering the positioning of the characters (the self and others) in space and time and that the act of positioning serves as 'a way to conceptualize the subject's identity as impinged by two forces, one with a person-to-world, the other with a world-to-person direction to fit; the first relying on a notion of the unitary subject as ground, the latter on a subject as determined by outside (mainly social and biological) forces. Making the interactive site of story-telling the empirical ground, where identities come to existence and are interactively displayed.' This act of positioning explains how the four 'written selves' were different characters within the development of the story. Through the telling of our stories we create a sense of self and we develop a concept of the world we live in.

REFLECTING ON THE 'WRITTEN SELF' – CONTEXTUALISATION AND SELF-REFLECTION

The rationale of writing or telling stories is partly to contextualise the 'written self' through reflection and reflexivity, but also to explore different modes of thinking, self-expression and exploration. In this section, I will concentrate on the understanding and purpose of reflection and reflexivity.

The act of reflection enables the individual to find meaning for his/her creations and to provide context for the self and the work created. According to Creme & Hunt (2002), reflexivity is a term that is widely used in social sciences, referring to a greater social awareness of the self and a consciousness of the self's role within the research process. This awareness is to place the researcher within a contextual framework of the research topic by telling her story and that of her research process. Auto/ethnographic studies operate on this principle of inquisitive research with the self as research topic that is investigated within a socio-historical context. Creme & Hunt (2002) refer to Qualley (1997) stressing that reflexivity involves engaging with the 'other'. In this case the authors are referring to the 'written self' as the 'other', and in my case the 'other' as the written or visual piece as it appears on the page, screen, canvas, or as the presenter. Creme & Hunt (2002) take this argument further by explaining that the reflexive engagement requires dialogue with the 'other' that is an internal, meaningful and intimate engagement yet an objective engagement that acknowledges the 'other'. The 'other' is the written word, the work created or the 'written self' that is investigated as 'different' and requires critical and analytical thinking in order to identify, understand and contextualise it.

This 'difference' can be described as taking on a different entity that forms a new text filled with new meaning. This new entity requires the writer or creator to establish a relationship with it and be able to reflect on the creation or 'written self' as something that is separate from the identity of the writer. In Creme & Hunt (2002: 154), Qualley (1997) contrasts the term reflexivity with the commonly used term 'reflection on practice' and describes reflection as 'a more static process; reflection may change behaviour and objects but reflexivity can change persons'. The notion of 'reflection-in-action', which Qualley referred to as 'reflection on practice', is a term developed by Schon (1987) describing it as learning through doing or experience. Such learning is not necessarily an intellectual form of learning, but rather learning through discovery, experiencing a new phenomenon, casual conversations or by making things. Holzwarth & Maurer (2001) considered the terms 'reflective' as well as 'self-reflective'. By 'reflective' they refer to reflecting on the skills and research content learned and by 'self-reflection' they refer to the reflection on self-learning and self-exploration, emotional responses, intuitive thinking and actions, the experiences and realisations about the self during the creative process.

To elaborate on my presentation and the four 'written selves', I will further illustrate the concept of the 'written self' by referring to the content of the presentation by discussing a selection of excerpts. This is to illustrate how a visual narrative that was carefully constructed by myself as the presenter provided the audience with a sense of my identity, my memories and my social and historical background, but also to illustrate the purpose of reflection, and by this I mean the ability to 'read' a 'text' and the ability to contextualise it.

Figure 1

Excerpt from the presentation: Telegram



This is a telegram sent by my Grandmother to my mother when I was born in 1974, in Pretoria, now Tshwane. The decorative use of traditional and indigenous South African fauna and flora is reminiscent of the 'old' South Africa. Although it instills a feeling of nostalgia, it epitomises Afrikaner nationalism and patriotism. Many of these flowers were used in the identities of organizations from the Apartheid era or used as a term or symbol that holds racist connotations. The Barberton Daisy (red flowers, second from top left) was the symbol used for the Blue Bulls (Noord-Transvaal) Rugby team and the Coral tree (red flowers, fourth from the top left) was named the 'Kaffir Boom'; although this refers to its botanical name, the term

became expressively racist. The Protea taking the centre position in the telegram becomes a metaphor for its position in a conservative Apartheid South Africa, although known as the national flower, it was also an emblem for the Apartheid era, and almost took its place on the national flag during the ruling of Verwoerd in the 1960s (http://www.fotw.us/Flags/za_old.html).

Figure 2

Excerpt from the presentation:
Portrait of my father's family



Figure 2 is a painting of my father's family. The work is inspired by a photograph taken in the 1960s in front of their house in 'Pretoria-Noord'.² The act of tracing the image of my deceased father and his family (with only my aunt still alive) became a therapeutic and meaningful act of recreation, leaving a trace of remembrance behind. It illustrates the exploration of identity by interpreting family photographs through the act of tracing and by attaching personal association and meaning, with reference to own memories and experiences, and creating a new memory by doing so. This act and concept of tracing is significant considering that with the death of an individual, we lose the memories as well.

Figure 3 is a photograph taken in the 1980s of the church council where my father served and acted as an 'Ouderling' (presbyter). The image encapsulates a patriarchal, white Afrikaner, conservative and Calvinistic upbringing, providing the audience with insights into my upbringing as an Afrikaner child and the era in which I grew up.

The reflection and reflexive process requires the same approach of analyses and investigation and an inquisitive search for meaning and context.

Figure 3

Excerpt from the presentation: *Portrait of the 'Kerkrad van die Gereformeerde Kerk Kameeldrift'*³



WRITING AND STORYTELLING AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING TOOL TO PROMOTE CREATIVE AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

I now turn to the connections between storytelling and academic development by looking at the subject Creative Development. Creative Development forms part of the two undergraduate degrees offered at Vega, The Brand Communications School: BA Communications Management specializing in Creative Brand Communications and BA Brand Building and Management. An understanding of the Self is key to the subject, Creative Development. This is because for students to learn how to create for 'others', such as

2 A suburb north of Pretoria (Tshwane)

3 The church Council of the Kameeldrift Reformed Church, East of Pretoria (Tshwane), taken in the 1980's. My father is seated in the front row, third from the right.

a client, they must first understand how to create for the Self. This understanding is an encouragement to investigate their identity through an inquisitive journey of self-exploration and self-reflection and to develop a sense of the creative and 'written self' and to understand what inspires and motivates them; in other words, for the students to understand their 'muse'. Telling our stories contributes to this understanding; it allows students to express and explore their life stories, their personal histories and upbringing that form the very core of their being. It is interesting to consider that the Muse, in Greek mythology, was one of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory who inspired and presided over the various creative arts.

James (2007: 107) once asked whether one should include an auto/biographical element to our personal and creative development and answered her question by saying: 'the most basic answer is that students already use autobiographical material in their assignments... doing so has helped them clarify the values and beliefs that drive their understanding'. Snyman (2000) offers further insight to the use of personal narrative by saying that: 'the driving force behind creative efforts, however, is inner motivation. Creators are involved in an activity for its own sake, not for school grades or paychecks... accessing and understanding this "inner motivation" seems to be so closely related to the personality's self image, confidence and entire personal history and circumstances...'

Fischer & Goblirsch (2006: 29) write that '[B]iographical narrations are accounts of experiences important to the person's development and to self-understanding'. They consist of small talk on an everyday basis and discussions with our friends and family about our lives. This allows us to reconstruct our biographical memories and experiences through interaction and in the form of telling our stories (written, visual or verbal narration or dialogue). Having conversations with our parents or guardians provides us with the preservation of our autobiographical memories, allowing us to preserve our memories over time.

Further to this, encouraging students to tell their stories will create interest in listening to the stories of others. Telling our stories enriches the history of the human race; it not only serves as a healing and reflexive process, but also provides a nuanced and deeper meaning to our lives and our history. Besides promoting students in telling their stories, we must encourage them to express them in any form they feel suitable. This is to encourage free and creative thinking and to instill an aspiration to explore new ideas, forms of expression and creative solutions. Students tell their stories through the myriad of works they create; be it in a free-writing exercise, in their artwork or designs, the doodles and seemingly non-relevant scribbles in their process books, as a performance piece, an audio-visual presentation, as an activist campaign, or as a creative writing piece.

In Creative Development we promote self-investigation, self-actualization and self-reflection as an integral part of the students' creative process, as well as creative and personal development. These serve as the core to their academic and practical development in the degree programme. James (2004: 105) draws on Cough (2003) to describe personal development planning as: '...improving student outcomes in terms of attainment and styles of learning as transferable skills across different academic and practice contexts, and personal skills of self-esteem, awareness and life planning'. She continues to explain that the personal or creative development process takes shape in various forms and that the reflection of one's development and the documentation thereof can be done in a logbook, sketchpad, diary, notebook, as self-assessment and in the form of a critique (James, 2004: 105). For each project, the students are required to keep a process book where all thoughts, ideas and references are documented; this book is for their own use and is not for assessment purposes. The process book assists them in the management of their creative process and serves as a reference that documents their transformation. It is useful to refer to previous ideas for new projects and to revisit their creative process and be able to reflect on it.

We have developed the concept of a Process Pathway to assist students in their self-reflection process. The Process Pathway requires students to reflect critically on their actions, their methodology, their process and the work they created. It encourages documentation of their development and provides a platform for them to articulate, contextualise and reflect on their creative and personal development. The Process Pathway proved to be a helpful tool for both learner and lecturer. The former enables students to reflect on their development and knowledge gained, creates a sense of self and self-empowerment, provides a platform to engage critically with their work and the context in which it was created, and encourages self-motivation and self-criticism. In contrast, the latter provides the lecturer with insights into the students' thinking, methodology and response to the project. Although the Process Pathway is submitted with the final work, it is not assessed, as it is believed that this will inhibit the student's thinking by becoming too focused on the structure and whether they do it 'right' or 'wrong'. The motivation for doing this should ultimately be intrinsic rather than extrinsic; Dineen *et al.* (2005) refer to the work of Hill (1991) and Talbot (1993) in suggesting that intrinsic motivation (self-motivation) is critical to achieve creative outcomes, whereas extrinsic motivation such as a test or assessment could hinder it. An informal style of writing, by allowing and encouraging students to articulate their thought processes, their ideas, their self-evaluation and self-reflection in a form like this, acclimatizes them to the idea of writing and ultimately prepares them for the demanding world of academia that is focused on the written word.

Introducing these various styles of writing and creative platforms, allow the students to explore and identify and develop their 'written selves', and by doing that, allow them to explore their identity and sense of self. Such exploration opens up opportunities for the students to engage with their academic, creative and personal development.

CONCLUSION

Writing and telling our stories are key elements to the understanding and examining of our identities, our social and historical background and personal history. Encouraging students to tell their stories also encourages various forms of self-expression and self-exploration. It also provides a platform that encourages self-reflection and reflexivity and which enables them to contextualise their 'written selves' and 'creative selves'. By doing this, greater self awareness and self actualization are created. As a teaching and learning tool, this will also encourage a greater acceptance and reception to creative writing, and with more experience, to academic writing. By understanding the concept of the 'written self', the students can become independent in their learning process by taking ownership of their creative and personal development.

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