*Might autobiography be useful in addressing the problems of gendered assessment*?

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Abstract:

As UK universities undergo unprecedented internationalisation, they struggle to shape a plethora of cultural and social capitals into an educational environment that is fair and equitable for all. ‘While academia has opened its doors, it has been unwilling or unable to dismantle the norms, networks, and practices that reproduce white, rich male privilege’ states Shilliam (Shilliam, 2014, p.15). With existing concepts of social justice proving adequate, lecturers seek new interpretative models of inclusivity.

In teaching MA Fine Art, Illustration and Drawing, communities of practice are facilitated through discussion, collaboration and engagement between students of differing backgrounds, nationalities, life experiences and neurodiversity. Critical reflection and experiential learning are deeply embedded in these courses and their assessment. The documents that result, support and narrate an individual’s developmental journey, whilst contextualising the self within wider discourses and debates. Reviewing these textual and visual outputs in the context of unconscious gender bias, led me to consider the trajectory of autobiography in terms of diversity.

This article is a launchpad for further enquiry. It questions whether present-day assessments somehow mirror the patriarchal attributes of men’s autobiographies that traditionally focused on power, success and achievement within the public realm. It also examines the more personal, introspective modes of women’s day-to-day self-referential writings for more useful approaches. Perhaps the memoirs, house-keeping records, correspondence and diaries representing women’s real-life narratives have specific relevance to students reflecting and analysing their progress. Feminist artists strategically constructed autobiographies to accentuate the issues women faced. Maybe students could appropriate these methodologies to re-imagine, re-present and rewrite their learning experiences. Autobiography encompasses the subjective, embodied and relational complexities of memory, narrative, creativity, identity, experience and intentionality (Smith & Watson, 2012, p.8). Given these characteristics, the genre arguably demands more consideration in art education.

Introduction:

In the context of 21st Century globalisation and increasing human mobility, UK Higher Education is undergoing unprecedented internationalisation. As Brexit, austerity and a widening socio-economic divide disrupt the intake of UK and European students, competing universities seek to replenish numbers from further afield via financially driven recruitment policies. These public institutions must provide for the individual needs of these learners, respect their differences, and create an educational situation that is fair and equitable for all. However, as student demographics shift and lecturers embrace a broadening plethora of cultural and social capitals, deeply ingrained bias rises to the surface. The fact that diversity quotas aligned with the broader UK population are only achieved with overseas students, places the responsibilities of inclusivity under fresh scrutiny. As Professor Robbie Shilliam argues, ‘the diminishment of “social justice” in many university strategic plans by the enlargement of internationalization agendas is testimony to the dissonance that exists between the principles of open access and the realities of institutional privilege’ (Shilliam, 2014, p.15). Protecting specific characteristics from discrimination: Age; Disability; Gender reassignment; Marriage and civil partnership; Pregnancy and maternity; Race; Religion or belief; Sex; and Sexual orientation, The Equality Act 2010 imposes a legal duty on universities to remove any disadvantages that persons of difference or disability might experience. However, according to Shilliam, ‘while academia has opened its doors, it has been unwilling or unable to dismantle the norms, networks, and practices that reproduce white, rich male privilege’ (Shilliam, 2014, p.15). If existing conceptual models of social justice in education are being rendered inadequate, we need to look again at our methods of delivering and measuring learning, and attempt to devise new interpretative categories for inclusivity and its implementation.

Although this article does not directly address the issues of dissonance in relation to student recruitment, it is relevant that review of my teaching practices and materials brought about new considerations in this climate. As a lecturer, I am mostly confident of circumventing the patriarchal prejudices, biases and assumptions of my conditioning in terms of race, gender, religion or belief, sexual orientation, disability and age. My students benefit from courses designed and constructed around diversity and inclusivity as core considerations, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn. To me, the greater the breadth of backgrounds, nationalities, life experiences and neurodiversity the better. The success of these Fine Art, Illustration and Drawing MAs as communities of practice, is built on valuing difference, and the discussion, participation, collaboration and peer learning to be gained from engaging with knowledgeable others. Embedded in this philosophy, is the notion that learning through practice and experience requires critical reflection upon it. Ongoing methodical analysis ‘in action’ helps equip learners with the skills and agility to handle the increasingly fluid aspirations, understandings and demands of being a creative. For such reasons, art education in the UK usually involves some form of reflexive writing as a measure of learning: variously referred to as a professional development folio, contextual journal, practice diary, or similar. In revisiting the title of this course element and its assessment for imminent Periodic Reviews, I was surprised that I hadn’t already connected its terminology with the theories, histories and strategies of autobiography that had previously shaped my doctoral research.

The problem of gendered assessment:

In reviewing assessment in terms of inclusivity, Liz Thomas and Helen May suggest that ‘social and cultural groups differ in the extent to which they share the values that underlie some assessment tools’ (Thomas & May, 2010, p.13). They cite how ‘Read et al. (2005) and Hartley et al. (2007) found evidence of bias relating to the gender of the student in the assessment of students’ essays, while some feminist researchers argue that conceptions of the ‘good’ essay are gendered both in content and structure (Thomas & May, 2010, p.13). This leads me to question whether the forms of developmental journals and portfolios that I oversee and mark on MA courses might be inadvertently biased towards the formal, academic style and public-facing ‘professional’ writing historically associated with men. If so, then might this somehow be countered through considering the marginalisation of women’s creative outputs and the way their reflective writing has often been trivialised as overly personal and diaristic?

As Nick Houghton and Tony Reeves point out, ‘creativity is a social construct, allied to individuality rather than teamwork, and too often considered an ability that only the gifted or highly talented possess (Houghton and Reeves, 2019, p1). According to these educational theorists, the assumption ‘stems ‘from the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century’ and its conceptions of genius as a male prerogative passed down from deity (Houghton and Reeves, 2019, p1). It is clear to me that notions of creativity as an innate or ‘natural’ ability remain prevalent in our understanding of a good artwork, piece of writing, etc. Moreover, I suspect that I may inadvertently impose unconscious bias when assessing critically reflective writing in students’ development folios, by perhaps rewarding more polished, academic and outwardly-facing achievement.

‘What counts as learning is highly contested and is tied in with competing constructions of who is a learner, what learning means and where learning can take place’ say Burke and Jackson (Burke & Jackson, 2007, p.6). To them, ‘these conceptions are always classed, gendered and racialised’, in a way that privileges ‘learning that happens in the public rather than private sphere of social life’ (Burke & Jackson, 2007, p.6). This suggests that acquiring the expertise, knowledge and relations for professionally productivity and competition, is regarded as more valuable than facilitating the emotional, practical and familial of the domestic. 18th Century industrialisation drove male workers into the city factories, delineating a ‘masculine’ public working arena of men from a ‘feminine’ private space of home. Although no longer confined to the interior, women still suffer pernicious generalisations linking them to a largely unremunerated, unchallenged familial realm, whilst pressures on men to be the principle provider, bread-winner and leader of the family are centred on a workplace protected by legislative policy. Burke and Jackson align historical gender distinctions with how ‘the experience of learning is devalued while the end product is the focus of attention’, (Burke & Jackson, 2007, p.6). By unpicking what and who are valued in learning, gender imbalances emerge in the attitudes, values, materials and assessment around learning that can be traced back through autobiography, to when women’s intellectual, creative and economic mobility was inhibited

Forms of autobiography

Since the 1960s, interest in the private as opposed to public histories of oppressed groups has resulted in closer analysis of women’s autobiographical practices and content. One proponent is the literary critic Estelle Jelinek, whose book *The Traditions of Women’s Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (2004) establishes how women's autobiography has differed from men's autobiography in terms of content, narrative form, and projected self-image. Jelinek suggests that men’s autobiographies emphasise the ‘public aspect of their lives, whereas women’s treat as their focus ‘their personal lives’ (Jelinek in Siegel, 1999, p.16). Women writers are also noted for using ironic, humorous and fragmented diaristic approaches as a mode of self-discovery, rather than writing with self-confidence about a self that has already been formed (Baer, 1993). Domna Stanton questions what ‘personal’ means: ‘a particular type of introspective and affective analysis?’ (Stanton, 1984, p.11). If it is so, then women’s ‘non-traditional’ autobiography is a primary exemplar for the methods of reflective discourse I am trying to teach.

Literary critic Kirsti Siegel argues that, ‘the assumptions of traditional autobiography mime many of the beliefs embedded in Western culture, eg. the centrality of white males, the privileging of mind over body, the importance of public versus private sphere, and so forth’ (Siegel, 1999, p.6). Some of the most influential linear histories have been offered up by men like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry Adams, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henry James and Benjamin Franklin. Such masculine autobiographies tend to be directed outwards, at professional, philosophical and political events, focused predominantly on power and achievement in the public sphere. By comparison, women’s personal writing about their day-to-day problems has often been disregarded.

Until recently, the memoirs, house-keeping records, correspondence and diaries representing women’s real-life narratives weren’t even aligned with the genre of autobiography. Women’s self-representations were not studied by academics as they didn’t attend to accomplishments regarded worthy of the title (Baer, 1993, p.1). According to literary critic Norinne Voss, in ‘no other literary genre as in autobiography have women produced such a varied and rich canon, yet received so little recognition for their achievements’ (Voss, 1986, p.218). These ‘non-traditional’ autobiographies have since been valued for providing us with vital social, cultural and political information about life in the past. For example, in *Behind Closed Doors* (2009), social historian Amanda Vickery referenced evidence such as household accounts, legal records, correspondence, literature and personal journals to show how gendered separations were manifested. However, I would argue that these distinctively personal texts of the private realm are still rarely considered equable to the more formal, academic approaches rooted in the patriarchal writings of successful men presenting themselves for public consumption.

Women’s creativity reduced to the autobiographical and biological:

I have long been interested in the persistent reduction of women’s artistry to the biological and autobiographical, as supported by Sigmund Freud’s notion that a woman’s character ‘cannot attain the strength and independence which give it its cultural significance’ (Freud, 1973, p.163).  To Freud, women were incapable of gaining the force of mind or sense of justice for social autonomy. ‘Women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own’, he wrote in a 1925 paper *The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes* (Freud, 2001, p.250). Supposedly devoid of the independent logical thought required of discovery, women were often understood to lack the content or control to create art beyond that which was inherent and arising ‘naturally’ from their personal and biological circumstances. As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock once debated in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art & Ideology* (1981), women’s artistry was lastingly ‘characterized as the antithesis of cultural creativity, making the notion of a woman artist a contradiction in terms’ (Parker & Pollock, 1981, p.4). It is arguable that Freudian theory continues to underpin the prioritising of men’s activities and creativities but second-wave feminism did much to address this. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson survey in their book *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (2012), the presumption of women’s art as autobiographical has been turned into a subversive strategy.

In visual representation, as in literature, the notion of autobiography brings with it a sense of truth: the transformation of the artist’s own experience into an artistic experience for the viewer, is understood to be central. Mieke Bal suggests that Louise Bourgeois knowingly incited assumptions ‘that the work expressed the artist’s personality while at the same time narrating elements from her life, to entrap viewers and expose their prejudicial ways of sentencing her and her art to inferiority (Bal, 2012, p.164). Since the 1970s, feminist artists like Mary Kelly used autobiographic material to simultaneously construct narratives and imply truth in ways that emphasised the harsh realities of women’s lives and discriminations they suffered. More recently, Tracey Emin harnesses the implied validity and truth of autobiography, concealing the artistry of her storytelling and accentuation behind a constructed persona. In this way, artists present ‘authentic’ lives that people frame within their own social and cultural terms of reality.

According to Smith and Watson, ‘the autobiographical is assumed as a mirror, a self-evident content to be “read”, but in the hands of contemporary artists it is not a ‘transparent practice’ but a performative act, encompassing the subjective, embodied and relational complexities of memory, narrative, creativity, identity, experience and intentionality (Smith & Watson, 2012, p.8). Despite the range of media with which artists such as Jenny Holzer, Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Savile, Frida Kahlo, Adrian Piper, Helen Chadwick, Annette Messager, Bobby Baker, Cindy Sherman and Bobby Baker present their personal narratives, the viewer presumes a transparent mirroring or ‘likeness’ just as they might in traditional self-portraiture. Given autobiography’s subjectivity and ability to ‘rewrite’ personal histories and make them public, it can offer ‘occasions for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives’ state Smith and Watson (Smith & Watson, 2012, p.9). All of this supports my belief that the trajectory of autobiography and its related forms and strategies can usefully inform reflexive learning methods and their assessment, with specific relevance to gender imbalance.

Reflective Research Methods

My practice-based PhD built on the feminist strategies that harnessed autobiography and fiction as an autoethnographic methodology. According to Patricia Leavy in *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (2009), most present-day qualitative research practitioners agree that ‘the personal is always, to some extent, embedded within research practice and resulting knowledge’ (Leavy, 2009, p.37). The implication is that even when a researcher tries to write themselves out, their own position, understanding, impressions, associations and experiences are implicit in the final representations. It is with this sort of centrality of the writer in mind, that I suggest we can usefully consider differing forms of autobiographical output in relation to gender inclusive assessment. For there are obvious parallels between literal autobiography and the ‘reflection in action’ regarded as essential to learning in the creative arts.

Ole Birk Laursen refers to literature that integrates autobiographical material and fiction as ‘life writing, which is a looser - and extremely capacious - term that encompasses other forms such as autobiography, testimony, personal narrative, photography, oral history and so on’ (Lauerson, 2012, p.6). He claims this form of self-reference can powerfully challenge ‘dominant discourses of race, gender and cultural identity’ and re-imagine agency, subjectivity and ‘the formation of individual selfhood in relation to the world’ (Lauerson, 2012, p.6). Perhaps opening up our assessment formats to such concepts could help move them in this direction. Carolyn Ellis suggests that ‘autobiographers can offer aesthetic and evocative insights using techniques of ‘showing’ designed to bring ‘readers into the scene’—particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions’ (Ellis, 2004, p.142). In this way, autobiography engages the reader/viewer in dialogue that allows them to ‘experience an experience’ says Ellis (Ellis, 1993, p.711). This affirms to me that further investigation of the most active, reflexive and diverse modes of autobiography, would be pertinent to making student outputs and their assessment more inclusive.

Conclusion

The more connections I consider the different ways autobiography can contextualise the self within wider discourses, debates and practices, the more I realise the enormity of my subject and how this article is merely the introduction of an enquiry to come. Yet I already have no doubt that interrogating such constructed personas, ‘life writing’ and partially fictional autobiographies will help to provide my students with more useful conceptual models of reflection and narration. If, as the MA Fine Art (AUB) handbook suggests, we want students to evaluate their practice and thinking, and raise questions about how they know what they know, and which methodologies and techniques have shaped the outcomes of their practices, then autobiographic considerations must be key.

Critical and reflective introspection becomes meaningful via the recognition and application of self, identity and ‘fit’. I base my teaching on the premise that students must utilise what is within to achieve their creative potential. To be truly innovative, they must learn how to tap into the specific combination of experiences, cultures, contexts, relations and embodied sensibilities that make them and their work unique. Only then can thy create the sort of original understandings and perspectives on the world that society needs of its artists.

Furthermore, it is perhaps through the self-referential articulations of diverse students, that we lecturers can ultimately keep up with our learners and their evolving needs. Maybe it is somewhere between their present-day experiences and the legacy of autobiography’s gendered past that new interpretative categories of diversity and inclusivity will arise. So, whilst I accept that this article leaves out very much more than it includes, I hope it might stimulate others to contribute their knowledge of autobiography to considerations of best-practice pedagogy in the visual arts. Certainly, as I face the forthcoming revalidations, I will endeavour to enable more varied forms of submission. ‘Inclusive assessment practice aims to design assessment models that allow all students to choose the format of assessment that will enable them to express their ideas in the most equitable way’ (Keating et al, 2012, p. 250-251). It seems high time that lists, diaries, journals, correspondence and other personal modes of reflection were valued more highly in the context of creative arts learning and assessment.

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