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Introduction to First Person research: on teaching and becoming

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Editorial

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This issue of First Person research includes two papers, both focusing on the dilemmas of teaching and learning in the classroom. In the first, Dave O'Connell describes making light of "gutting roosters" in an introductory classroom exercise on worst jobs; after processing the experience with a colleague, however, he confesses some surprise at his reaction and subsequently engages in self-inquiry with regard to the nature of work and the tension between his espoused theories and theories-in-use as a professor in the classroom. In the second paper, Joy Beatty, Jennifer Leigh and Paul Szwed describe the process by which they acknowledge past frustrations with team-based classrooms, create their own team for the purpose of investigating the problem, and take an action-inquiry approach to setting up, experimenting with and reflecting on new approaches to a team-based class.

As First Person research, the interpretive process of these two papers reflects an ethic of reflexivity that is shaped by language, ideology and culture (among other factors). The notion of "validity-as-reflexive-accounting" places the researcher, the topic and the interpretive process in interaction (Altheide and Johnson, 1994: 489). Such a reading on validity is not confined to pure knowledge or truth claims; rather, the accounting process needs to describe interactions among researcher, context and actors – examples of which we find in the papers included. Authors also need to faithfully represent the varying perspectives and voices, and then show where their own voice stands in relation to these. Or, simply put, what happens within the researcher "must be made known" (Behar, 1996: 6).

As points of entry into our discussion of the relevance of reflexive accounting to First Person research, we draw on two metaphors used by the authors to the papers included. The first metaphor is the "confession" used by Dave O'Connell in discussing his experience with "a messy day one." The second metaphor is the quest for the "Holy Grail," used by Joy Beatty, Jennifer Leigh and Paul Szwed in reflecting on the process of their team's self-inquiry into working with student teams. We discuss each metaphor in turn.

First, a confession is someone's acknowledgement of personal actions and thoughts, and the "confessional tale" is a well-documented genre in ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988). Confession, private or public, is a valued technique for producing the truth, and its effects are far-reaching (Foucault, 1980). The confession is a ritual in which the speaking subject is also often the subject of the statement. However, it always sits within a power

relationship: one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of an authority that requires, prescribes or appreciates the confession, and then intervenes to judge, punish or forgive, console and reconcile. Who is such an authority in academic contexts? Is it our peers? Or is it some other voice that resonates within us? Further, the confession involves the truth to be corroborated by the obstacles it has had to overcome so that it could be formulated. And last but not least, the confession is a ritual in which the expression, in and of itself, can bring about intrinsic change in the person who articulates it (Foucault, 1980).

Next, there is the search for the "Holy Grail." The Grail is a highly significant and desired object that holds the essence of all that is good. Ultimately, however, narratives of the Holy Grail are about a "quest;" while such a prolonged endeavor may not yield its object, it is the *pursuit* that matters. There are many genres for inscribing a quest, but the most common in interpretive organizational research is that of the "epic." Jeffcutt (1994) describes the epic as an account of a perilous journey with a crucial struggle or an ordeal; success then results in the exultation of the heroes involved. The "heroes" in an epic can be people in the organizations researched, or the researchers themselves. So while reflexivity can be a matter of methodology, its challenge is that it can become a quest for the status of reflexive piety (Shotter, 1993). If reflexivity becomes a means of attaining theoretical redemption by legitimating one's stance – through a confessional or epic narrative – then it becomes a self-defeating strategy.

Reflexivity is not about attaining a better status for an account, but about openness and transparency in research that is explicitly value-laden (e.g. Gergen, 1988; Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1995). The challenge in including the "self" is that First Person research is not so much about the self as it is about the "other" in relation to the "self." Its focus is on interactions with other people or other cultures. So an ongoing issue revolves around how much reflexivity is appropriate for a narrative so that it does not become an expression of self-indulgence. There is always a balance of representation to be negotiated between the transparency of the "self" and the expression of the "other" so that one does not lose sight of what is being represented (Jeffcutt, 1994; Behar, 1996). This is what enables one to negotiate the fine line between the humility of "confession" and the confidence of "profession," as Dave O'Connell puts it.

Both papers included in the First Person research section involve a discussion of personal challenges and some of the means by which the authors have tried to surmount them. Neither paper uses a confession or epic narrative to make truth claims or to prescribe lessons and techniques for the reader. Both papers underline that our learning is not so much about attaining a secure status and then resting on our laurels as it is about the ongoing pursuit of *becoming* "good" teachers to our students. Both papers depict the centrality of collegiality, and both papers draw on experiences with colleagues that shaped the authors' thinking.

Finally, both papers involve a departure from the "tidy" (Beatty *et al.*) and the simultaneous embrace of the "messy" (O'Connell) to articulate the ongoing challenges to attaining teaching ideals. Far from self-aggrandizing narratives, reflexive accounts by members of the academy bring us down from those imaginary pedestals to illustrate the practical, everyday struggles involved in becoming "good" teachers, and in realizing our ambitions to serve our students well. To borrow from Beatty *et al.*, reflexivity involves "sharing the uncertainty our students face." Abdicating the pedestal brings our role as teachers into sharp relief; drawing on O'Connell, one is well reminded that "shining the light" does not require "a shiny job."

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