

SHASHIDHAR BELBASE

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF “MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY”

A retrospection of the distant self

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on “My Autoethnography” that I performed during writing dissertation for M.Phil. in Education at a university in Nepal. For this, I reflect on my experience of doing autoethnography with four turning points – a connection to mentors, a presentation of poetic narrative in a class, a proposal for this research, and the dissemination of “My Autoethnography”. I present an evocative narrative of ‘the parallels’ connecting childhood experiences with blissful eternal dance. I analyse it from the perspective of methodological, relational and ethical lenses. I present some merits and caveats of autoethnography as a method of research based on my experience of using the approach. This also helped me to see not only to the past and present, but it also opened my eyes to envision the future in terms of learning and teaching mathematics. The other merit was access to my private world through the construction of thick and rich evocative narratives with a variety of textual expressions and a sense of mental emancipation. The major caveats of this approach were associated with the extent of focus in writing the narratives, vagueness with mystical expression and imaginative connections between the events of different time, an indulgence on personal stories making forceful connection with theories, self-disclosure of sensitive issues, and ethical issues related to the narratives about the others. I conclude the paper with a reflection and poetic reminiscent of ‘My Autoethnography’.

Keywords: Autoethnography, poetic narrative, mystical narrative, emancipation.

Autoethnography (or auto/ethnography) is a form of qualitative research method that uses the researcher’s personal experiences as foreground and social-cultural-political context as the background. This approach uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe, analyse, interpret, and critique the beliefs, values, and actions acknowledging the self-other relationship through depth of reflective and reflexive evocative narratives of different genres (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). It is a form of self-study by writing narratives of different genres, for example, stories, poems, dialogues, drama, collage, etc., to name a few that focus on the vivid memories, feelings, thoughts, emotions, angers, griefs, excitements, anxieties, fears, and aha! This paper first exposes my ‘self’ to the readers with historical accounts of unfolding moments to construct “My Autoethnography”. I present and discuss a vignette that that relates my childhood to my daughter’s childhood play and relates the parallel to

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eternal dance of Shiva. I explore some merits and caveats of “My Autoethnography” followed by a brief reflection with poetic evocation.

EXPOSING SELF AND REVISITING THE HISTORY

My Early Mathematics: Natural Mathematics

For me, the charisma of early mathematics of pebbles and cows of clay models started since spring of 1975 with sprouting blossoms of apricot in front of my house at Karange Kot, Dang, Nepal when I was three years old. I wondered at the changing seasons that brought different colors around my small world. I used to sit at the east door of my small hut when mother went to collect firewood and fodders for cows. I used to collect pebbles to represent animals, family members and some as motorcars. Clay models were my favorite play items. My journey of learning mathematics started unknowingly from childhood before schooling with the pebbles, models, changing seasons and surrounding events. Following poetic evocation is a ramification of my early childhood experience with the nature and the world.

Pebbles of diverse faces and color
 Metaphors of living cattle
 Paring a big with a small
 Representing the caring mother
 One-to-one correspondence
 Perfect natural game
 Odd was out from the set
 What a beautiful consequence
 Pure... and pure and tranquil
 No symbols, scripts or artificiality
 Super math with supreme reality
 Full of joy and cosmos within a mini feel

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This was ‘a game changing poem’ that I recited in a class in 2006. This poem emanated through inner temperament, articulating an art, and a mesmerizing part of narrative self. It was the beginning of “My Autoethnography” that helped me to embrace the veracity of my life as a student, a teacher, and a neophyte researcher. The poem was not just a ‘virtuous’ compose, but it was an embodied self and it was “me” that evolved through the texts within the silence of breathing in and out and searching meaning of “who am I?”. I felt a power in thinking along the line of poetry to express my early experiences of joyful play in the childhood. Those moments I still rejoice and feel privileged to have the opportunity to feel the nature and to be in the nature.

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Revisiting the History

It was some time in 2006. I was doing my Master of Philosophy (M. Phil.) in Education from Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED). At the same time, I was working as a faculty member of Mathematics Education in the same institution. I completed all course works, but not the dissertation by the beginning of 2006. Peter Taylor from the Curtin University of Technology visited KUSOED as a visiting faculty for a few days. I asked Bal Chandra Luitel, an assistant professor at KUSOED, if Peter and himself could guide me through the dissertation writing. He advised me to talk to Peter about it. I asked Peter, “I am doing my M.Phil. dissertation. Can you be my supervisor for this?” Peter replied, “I am not sure if I can do it. First, write a few pages of what you want to do. Then only I can tell you about it.” This conversation was the first milestone in “My Autoethnography”. The first milestone, a conversation with my mentors, kindled the thought process about my ‘self’ as an agency with first narratives of self-understanding (Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2010).

That evening after talking to Peter about possibility of being my research supervisor, I thought of what could be the possible things that I was interested in for the research. The first thing that came to my mind was to expose myself to him and reveal to him who I was. I jotted down a few lines of my autobiography of being a village boy to play freely around with pebbles, sand, mud, ants, insects, and plants. I wrote stories of being a learner of mathematics in the primary, lower secondary, secondary levels, and then in the university. I also wrote about my experience of teaching mathematics. The opening lines started with the above poem with the title “My Early Mathematics: Natural Mathematics”.

The next evening, I met Peter and Bal at KUSOED at Man Bhawan in Lalitpur. We planned for Peter’s guest lecture on “Mythmaking and Mythbreaking in the Mathematics Classroom” (Taylor, 1996) for Master of Education (M.Ed.) class. I printed enough copies of the paper for students to read and discuss in the class. Before going to the class, I handed over my first autobiographical writing to Bal and he handed it over to Peter. Peter read the first few paragraphs of my autobiography. I was anxious about how he felt and what would be his reaction while reading the opening poem and my life story. I thought, “Would he be interested in my stories of learning mathematics?” His first reaction was, “It’s terrific, Shashi!”. He asked me, “Can I use your poem in today’s discussion in the class?” I was overwhelmed by his positive response to my poem. In the class, he began the discussion on the chosen paper. First, he projected the poem on a Power Point slide. He asked me to read it loudly for the class. I am not sure how the students felt about my poem recitation, but it was the second milestone in “My Autoethnography”. The second milestone, that when I read my first autoethnographic poem, created my ‘self’ through expression of poetic agency which allowed “expression of passion and spirit I had long suppressed” (Spry, 2013, p. 708).

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Nepal's political history was unfolding through friction between the political parties and then King Gyanendra Bikram Shah in 2005. He took a complete control over the power for the second time on February 1, 2005. The seven-party alliance and then underground Communist Party of Nepal Maoist jointly staged protests and strikes in the country. The clash between the agitating parties and government forces led to political turmoil. The government imposed curfew in different cities throughout the country. Our regular M.Ed. and other classes got disturbed due to curfew. Peter and Bal were at Dhulikhel in a visit to the central campus of Kathmandu University. They could not return Kathmandu due to the protests in Dhulikhel, Banepa, Bhaktapur, and Kathmandu. The classes were closed-down for an uncertain period. I utilized the time to write and frame a research proposal to formally start my M. Phil. Dissertation. Outside my residence, there was strict curfew. I could go out only for an hour to buy daily essentials. Rest of the time I continued writing my dissertation proposal. Frequently there were sounds of "slogan" in favor of democracy and against the monarch. There were sounds of 'bang' from police firing shells of tear gas. The protest continued for a few days amid curfew and clashes between government forces and the agitating parties. This was an incubation of Federal Democratic Nepal. At the same time, this was an evolution of my being as a neophyte researcher. I completed the draft proposal within three days. I sent it to the Research Committee of KUSOED including Peter and Bal. The responses of the committee members to the proposal gave me tremendous encouragement. The responses from Bal, Peter, and Mana encouraged me to continue writing dissertation chapters with construction of narratives, poems, and theoretical links to my lived mathematical experiences. I was in excitement with self-reflective and reflexive thinking and writing. This was the third milestone in "My Autoethnography". The third milestone, with self-reflectivity and reflexivity, extended my 'self' to portrayal of textual 'selfie' to uncover the meaning of being a learner and a teacher with integration of a large picture of my lifeworld (Kwon & Kwon, 2015).

After a few days, the political situation in Nepal turned to a direction of peace with democracy when the King appointed a new prime minister and reinstated the parliament that he dissolved earlier. Educational institutions resumed functions in the normal routine. I continued teaching regularly. At the same time, I engaged in reading papers, book chapters, theses and dissertations, including Bal's master's project (Luitel, 2003) on Narrative Exploration of Nepali Mathematics Curriculum Landscape: An Epic Journey. These readings tremendously helped me in understanding qualitative research in general and autoethnography in particular for writing the dissertation by connecting my personal to the social and cultural context. I used to send my chapters to Peter in his email and he used to send me corrections and feedback in hard copy by post. It continued for about three months. I defended my M.Phil. Dissertation on "My Journey of Learning and Teaching Mathematics from Traditionalism to Constructivism: A Portrayal of Pedagogical Metamorphosis" on July 21, 2006 (Belbase, 2006). This was probably the first attempt to introduce autoethnography in a university in Nepal after Bal's attempt to introduce it in Nepalese context. This attempt was the fourth milestone in "My Autoethnography"

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that opened the door of autoethnography as a tool for researching and teaching for transformative education in Nepal. Since then, dozens of master’s dissertations (e.g., Poudel, 2010; Shrestha, 2011) and possibly a few Ph.D. theses (e.g., Qutoshi, 2016) have been already completed. And, still, several students in Nepal are adopting autoethnography as their method of doing qualitative research.

“My Autoethnography” unfolded through the four distinct stages as milestones. When I revisited my dissertation to keep track of what I did and how I did it to write this paper, I found some narratives (e.g., The Parallels) to be worth revisiting in this article that helped me to relate some merits and caveats of adopting autoethnography as an approach to qualitative research. I discuss “The Parallels” as a representative of my evocative autoethnographic narrative.

THE PARALLELS: A SENSE OR NONSENSE

Dollies, toy-cars, plastic animals, a mini-piano, some rubber balls, and blocks are around her. Anjila (in her third year) seems very busy assembling different models from the blocks. She makes a tall building; dismantles it and makes a boat out of it and puts two babies, Pintoo and Minto, on it and sails on a virtual river (she imagines a river on the floor carpet). She hums gentle songs. Frequently my eyes go to her genuine play, innocent play and perfectly natural play as I am reading a book.

“The particle interactions give rise to the stable structures which build up the material world, which again do not remain static, but oscillate in rhythmic movements. The whole universe is thus engaged in endless motion and activity; in a continual cosmic dance of energy.” (Capra, 1989, p. 270)

Anjila throws a block as it does not fit properly with others and she softly sobs. I leave my reading and pick her up in my arms and tell her to play with toy and dollies. She starts moving a car on the floor with a dolly in one hand. I turn to the next page.

“..... This dance involves an enormous variety of patterns but, surprisingly, they fall into a few distinct categories. The study of the subatomic particles and their interactions thus reveals a great deal of order.The dance of Shiva symbolizes not only the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, but also the daily rhythm of birth and death which is seen in Hindu mysticism as the basis of all existence. At the same time, Shiva reminds us that the manifold forms in the world are Maya- not fundamental, but illusory and ever changing- as he keeps creating and dissolving them in the ceaseless flow of his dance” (Capra, 1989, p. 270).

Anjila is a little distance from me and I hear her childish hum as she produces sounds of her car. She is pushing a red car up on the corridor (Hui...n, hui...n...).

I remember a day some thirty-nine years back.

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I was moving a truck made of clay, humming to myself loudly when it was climbing up and jolting. (Dhueen.....Dhueen). The truck overcame the jolting. It turned left and right along the spiral road. I was pulling it with a cotton thread. The truck reached the rocky mountain and I loaded it with some pebbles. (My book falls to the right, but it is still in my grip) Then after a while, it was returning to its destination. Suddenly, a shadow appeared from behind me. My truck was brutally squashed under a giant foot and crushed to pieces. Then it flew away as if it was a football. I lay down on the ground, sobbing in mourn at the demise of my truck, my creation, my science and my mathematics.

I was with tears in my eyes when Anjila came to me with a wheel off the crankshaft. I wiped her tears with a handkerchief and mended the car. She smiled at me and went to play. My book was just at the right side folded down with page 270 at the top “The Parallels”.

Is there any coincidence of her play with toy-car, my play with clay-made- truck and God Shiva's *tandav*? I try to link the mathematical notion with toy-car, clay- made-truck and cosmic cycle of creation and destruction. I think there is a parallel relation of mathematical ideas with Anjila's play with my early experiences. I enjoyed a lot with clay models and she enjoys the same with plastic models. The place is different, time is different but I think feeling out of these is same. So, every child should be given opportunity to explore ideas from objects they play with and games they play.

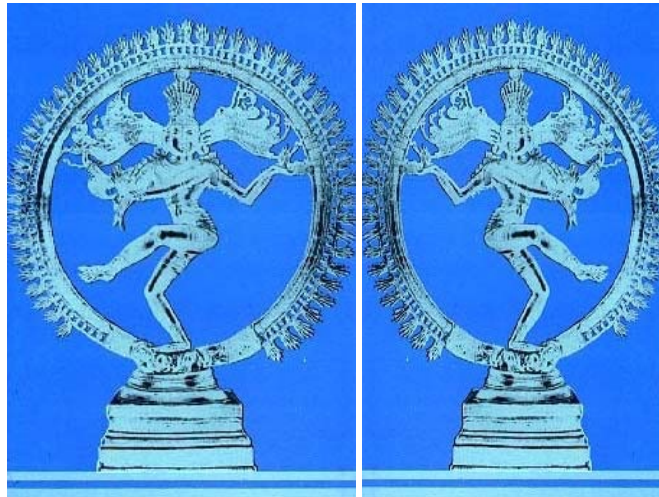


Figure1: Shiva's Tandav

The dance of bliss or the Ananda Tandavam of Shiva (Figure 1) is said to symbolize the five divine acts (Pancha Krityas) of creation, sustenance, dissolution, concealment, and bestowment of grace. These five divine acts (Pancha Krityas) form all sorts of mathematics in the universe where my math learning is only an

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assumption to feel as small as an atom in comparison to the size of the earth and even smaller. So, I feel that the knowledge claim in mathematics is substantially nominal in my nominalist perspective.

What a coincidence? Anjila’s model building, car, dolly and many more ... with my clay truck all came to us in the process of childish play. I think that it was how learning mathematics was rooted in my childhood with play and games. Shiva is there to create these parallels and destroy after a while (again a parallel), in a cosmic sense, a very short duration of the periodic motion of his “*taandab*”. Perhaps it might be an infinitesimal element in the journey of my learning of mathematics. I feel that the childish play was at one end and super consciousness of mathematics at the door of nirvana is and will be at another end, and that both are at infinite distance of time, length, understanding, history of human civilization, socio-cultural practices and quantum of my pedagogical metamorphosis.

During the past thirty years, there has been a growing interest among teachers and educators in the meaning children make up of a variety of contexts through their explorations in the world (Carruthers & Worthington, 2006). I tried to reflect upon my childhood activities that were directly or indirectly linked with mathematical concepts and meaning making in terms of number, shape, patterns, structure, relation, similarity and differences. It’s really difficult to go back to the past and find important nodal events to link to the present and point in the future. It might be easier to look at what others are doing, to ask what motivated them to learn mathematics. It might be tolerable to gather data from others and interpret to draw valid conclusions but it is really difficult to go deep into the past of self, to find some important events. So, I have tried to excavate some such contextual events of my childhood, some may be overlapping with others and some may be distinct but I think it is a product of our society and culture and it can depict contemporary basis to pave the way to present and to go ahead in future.

Studies have focused on emergent writing (Bissex, 1980), children’s schemas (Athey, 1990), drawings, model making and play with objects (Pahl, 1999), and early mark making (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). People have started focusing their writings and investigations on children’s schema, drawing, model making and play so that we can better understand the way children learn effectively and make their meanings about the world and so that a better pedagogical metamorphosis can take place for transformative education. How does a child pair objects, form patterns, draw figures and make schema plays a significant role? I think, in the real understanding of the nature of mathematics of childhood and correspond with school mathematics.

None came to say, “children make mathematical meaning in multi-modal ways through their play and with a variety of resources and media”. I feel that my elders and parents were not supportive of what I was doing in my own way of learning things around. In my understanding, why I was doing the things that seemed un-

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necessary to them and useless in their feeling. It might be that they had their own ideas and opinions about how children learn things and play with objects around. But I was a bit crazy of play and games of my interest which were not of their interest. It could be the possible cause of conflict between parents and me.

Although I did not get support from my elders and parents in my own way of learning mathematics through play and games, I am supporting my daughter even though she plays with artificial objects around her. I want to give her a natural environment but I can't send her to remote rural area to learn from the nature. My pedagogical process is still under transformation and still lacks the elements of radical transformation.

I believe that children's way of making meaning and understanding the mathematical phenomena can contribute a lot to parents' and teachers' understanding of the complex way that children learn. Yes, it seems a fantastic idea. I could draw a parallel line of thought when I observed Anjila's playing with a toy car and my playing a clay-model-truck. Then I remembered Capra (1989) explaining the infinite cosmic dance of God Shiva. Morning shows the day, the productive plant has a smooth leaf in its babyhood, can be a good adage for children's ways of making meaning and understanding mathematics with infinite possibilities in the future. Certainly, it becomes a good lesson to parents and teachers if observed carefully, meaningfully and logically. So, I think that children are teachers and teachers are children, and vice versa, in the process of teaching and learning. It seems to me that who teaches and who learns is blurred in the educative process and in the process of pedagogical metamorphosis.

In my understanding, children invent ideas and they create their own philosophical sphere but not necessarily do they know it as philosophy. To me, a violin does not know what music it creates and children don't know what philosophy they might have developed but yes, I think they develop their own philosophy of play, philosophy of world and philosophy of life, though in miniature. When my elders were going to cut the throat of a he-goat and kill it for meat, I used to hide my face. I could not watch the cutting of a chicken from its neck. I realize that it could be a philosophy of "ahimsa" and mathematically a philosophy of "correspondence of life to life".

I think my play with pebbles, clay models, sticks and other game items did not make sense to the world of elders and parents. It was useless and time destroying for them though it gave me heavenly satisfaction, super consciousness to link nature and self. Gura (1992) states that when children engage in play that makes sense to them, and partnership with adults, they can make relationships between practical mathematics and the disembedded symbolism of formal mathematics. Partnership with adults, yes, it could be helpful to learn formal symbolic mathematics by building its relation to the day-to-day life of mathematics. But, it was not applicable in my case before my school days though I am now helping my daughter in this regard. Certainly, my experience of lust to play and playing materials still reminds me of the past when I

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see a baby's play things at the side of the road at Sundhara, New Road and Ratna Park. I choose one or two for my daughter although my other half says it as a waste of money.

These are a few examples that researches have been carried out on children's ways of learning mathematics in different corners of the world. In our context, these researches in other countries could have little meaning as the quanta of social and cultural life is different in Nepal. I have not yet had an opportunity to read any research findings about children's informal learning of mathematics in the context of our society and culture. But, consciously or unconsciously children are engaged in learning mathematics informally at home, farmland, grassland, riverside or anywhere they play and work. This is likely to have a tremendous effect on the learning of formal or academic mathematics in schools, although teachers might address it or not, though curriculum focuses on it or not. To me, children's learning of mathematics from their surroundings does not stop although it may fluctuate. But it seems more systematic and relevant to the child if informal mathematics becomes a basis to learn formal or academic mathematics at school and college.

The rhythmic movement of the particles, subatomic particles and the heavenly bodies roaming the vast universe, Shiva's "taandab" and my toy truck and my preschool mathematics; the research findings and construction of new theories all are 'Shangri-La' in my journey of learning mathematics. I am trying to search the social and cultural context within me and from my way of learning mathematics before school, in school, and after school. Shiva is there with me in the process of pedagogic metamorphosis, again a rhythm in his cosmic dance, a symbol of creation and destruction, a way of research.

The giant foot that crushed my clay truck might be right as I was indulged in play forgetting everything else. Sometimes elders used to give orders to do a little work at home in my capacity but my play disturbed in the household work. So, they might have taken such steps to divert my concentration towards work. I don't think that they did not have any idea about learning mathematics through games and play. In my understanding, simply either they were unaware of the importance of play in the learning of mathematics and in encouraging the creativity of a child or their approach and understanding was different from that I expected. How can I now blame them for not doing justice to me? How can I claim that I was not treated fairly in my play? To what extent were my elders responsible for discouraging or encouraging my learning of mathematics through games, play, models, and other activities at home? These are questions in my thinking but without concrete answers.

I remember the events of my childhood although it was difficult after my twenties. I remember how I learned playing cards though nobody taught me. I remember how I knew how to swim in a river, though I did not get any training, and I still remember how I learned to ride a bicycle though my elder brother did not let me touch his new bicycle. I played with friends or alone throwing sticks and looking how far it can

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slide, throwing coins and counting how many dropped into a whole, and making marks on the sand or dust representing flowers, leaves, and other things. Carruthers and Worthington (2006) suggest that now we should move away from the idea of ‘human sense’ towards observing children’s learning in terms of ‘children’s sense’. They further emphasize that if parents and teachers allow the child to play, lead their group, and make marks, these activities give the child an opportunity for their natural development and growth of mathematical knowledge (Carruthers & Worthington, 2006).

So, my point of view in this chapter is that there should be a parallel linkage between informal mathematics and formal mathematics according to the cognitive levels of children. I think children have a strong power to learn mathematics during their play, interactions with adults and peers and day-to-day observations. Such informal mathematics learned by children should be properly identified in a socio- cultural perspective and it should be incorporated in school mathematics. I think development of a child physically, mentally and intellectually is possible if there is a proper connection of informal mathematics and formal mathematics. It seems to me that the way Anjila was learning mathematics was parallel to mine, meeting at infinity at the common point of formal mathematics, though we were close to our educative process. By meeting at infinity, I mean the perfect match of informal and formal mathematics is yet an ideal though they are closely related and complementary to each other in the world of mathematics (Belbase, 2006).

I analyze the above narratives in “My Autoethnography” from three distinct lenses— methodological, relational, and ethical.

AN ANALYSIS OF “MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY”

Methodological Lens

I observed three elements in the methodological lens in terms of - What to do? How to do? And, why to do autoethnography? I constructed narrative of my experience of informal mathematics as a ground for formal mathematics. These narratives recollected memories from childhood. The recollection connected my ‘self’ to the remote village on a hillside where I grew up, played, and enjoyed the moment of childhood. The narrative also contextualized the moment of the memory in a musical flow that invigorated the poetic sprout within me. I constructed textual narrative convoluted into a poetic self-reflexive narrative. A ‘storied self’ emerged into a ‘poetic self’ in the poem My Early Mathematics: Natural Mathematics. The next narrative on the parallels, I depicted a sense of connection between childhood with my little daughter’s world of play with dollies, toy-cars, plastic animals, mini-piano, etc. I tried to draw a parallel between my self-consciousness to childhood with rhythms of natural forces and the world of Maya (illusion). These are a few examples of other narratives where the real and ideal world came together in “My

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Autoethnography” with the notion of research as a process of autobiographical writing in an interpretive textual form.

My narratives in autoethnographic textual forms generated a common space of native anthropology, ethnic autobiography, and autobiographical ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Within the first one, I studied my group (as a child) being an insider in the stories. While viewing from the second one, I could think of myself as a member of ethnic minorities and I could write narratives to portray life stories with under privileged, powerless, and suppressed identities. In the third one, I infused my lived experiences as a child or a learner or a teacher with the ethnographic tales making personal a cultural and vice-versa. I had triple identities –first, as an anthropologist with insider perspective; second, as an ethnic autobiographer with a voice to be heard; the third, as an autobiographical ethnographer with personalized stories of the other (children, learners, and teachers). While performing these functions, I employed reflexive methodologies with self-study of practice (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015), autobiography of self and others (Holman, Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013), lived experience (van Laren et al., 2014), and art-based poetic inquiry (Pillay, Naicker, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2016).

Relational Lens

I anticipated three aspects in the relational lens – Who are involved? What is the relationship? And, how to balance the relationship? An autoethnography portrays “interrelationships between autobiographies, lived educational experiences, and wider social and cultural concerns” (Chang 2018; Grant, Short, & Turner, 2013 as cited in Pillay et al., 2016, p. 1). The researchers may explore myriad of relational aspects, for example, compatible or incompatible, dynamic or static, receptive or unreceptive, perceptive or unperceptive, collaborative or uncollaborative, etc. to weave the stories across three dimensions – time, place, and culture—of one’s lifeworld (Manovski, 2014; Pillay, Naicker, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2016). Hence, autoethnography is all about ‘relational consciousness’ of self and others in relation to events, objects, time, and actions to make sense of lived experiences (Simon, 2013; Timm, 2016).

“My Autoethnography” depicted relation of being a child, a student at different levels, and then a teacher within the frame of time as a dimension of change (Mendez, 2013). The episodic expressions of my childhood experience of playing with natural things compared to daughter’s play with the artificial artifacts demonstrated a temporal aspect of two kinds of life within the same stage -- one in the remote past and other in the relative present. While doing this, I tried to balance the artistic expressions of lived experiences with aesthetic aspect of lifeworld as a part of Maya (illusion) (Barleat, 2013).

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Ethical Lens

I outlined three key factors in the ethical lens – What is the power relation? How to balance the power? And, how to protect self and other identity? One of the most important aspects of autoethnography that I considered was ‘power’ (Manovski, 2014; Richards, 2016). In “My Autoethnography” I questioned “the politics and poetics of representation” with power (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3). These questions included the issues of identity and selfhood, voice and authenticity, cultural displacement, power and privilege, equity and justice, and liberation (Quicke, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

I agree that an autoethnographer possesses dual identity or selfhood in the research— one as subject who studies and the other as object whom he or she studies (Pompper, 2010). The subject-object boundary blurs in the process of doing autoethnography (Nicotera, 1999; Butz & Besio, 2009). In this context, possessed other identities depending on my gender role, professional life, family relation, social and political power and privilege. Hence, I embodied “multiple and shifting identities” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3).

The other issues in “My Autoethnography” were related to voice and authenticity related to the construction of my ‘self’ in relation to the ‘other’ (Benolt, 2015). Whose voice did my autoethnographic writing and expressing represent? Did it present the voice of the author (me)? How did it present the voice of the other? These questions, to me, were related to privilege of voice that was a part of an ethnographer’s reflexive accounts of experiences in a context (Quicke, 2008). These reflexive accounts presented an insider perspective which I considered more authentic than that of an outsider (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

An autoethnography may depict the picture of a cultural displacement is one of the most stringent experiences for a person, family, community or the entire cultural group (Reed-Danahay,1997). It was not an issue during writing “My Autoethnography” in a direct sense. However, this issue was dominant in many parts of the world causing severe destruction to cultural identity of persons or groups. The autoethnographer as an insider of this phenomenon may suffer from loss of identity, power, and cultural privilege in changed circumstances. If it takes a positive path, he or she may adopt new or dominant culture and worldview shifting his or her role and identity by “shifting cultural, national, and textual spaces” (Lee, 2008). Professional identity may undergo several cycles of changes or transformation with new experience, knowledge, and practice (Williams, 2014) though such transformation may come together with cultural displacement (Mendez, 2013).

The analysis of the narratives from the perspective of methodological, relational, and ethical lenses helped me to be considerate about merits and caveats of “My Autoethnography”.

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MERITS AND CAVEATS IN ‘MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY’

Every research method comes with some advantages and limitations. Therefore, autoethnography as a research method has both advantages and limitations. Most of the research papers on autoethnography rarely discuss the limitations, except mentioning some methodological limitations in the methods section. I discuss some merits and caveats of this approach in the following sub-section.

Merits of “My Autoethnography”

While doing ‘My Autoethnography’, I found many advantages of this method. First, it provided an access to my private world (Mendez, 2013) through self-reflective and reflexive thinking and writing about learning and teaching mathematics. It helped me to gaze inner world. It helped me to break the boundary between my private world and the public world to some extent while connecting my personal stories to the social and cultural context to make sense of my experiences. Second, it provided rich data (Pavlenko, 2002) about issues of learning and teaching mathematics from my childhood to university level. I crafted reflective and reflexive vignettes and journals that helped me to make sense of experiences that I had during different stages of life as a learner and teacher. I touched upon the past by combining recollection, creative imagination, and artistic manipulation of experiences through the fictive and imaginative writing (Wisniewski, 2015). While doing this, I could draw several imaginative connections between layers of memory that made sense of freely roaming and playing, learning, and teaching mathematics (Castor, 2015) by expanding the imaginative space for myself (Nanda, 2015).

As a method of constructing or collecting data, autoethnography was an easy process. It provided me an easy access to the data because I called upon my own learning and teaching experiences and wrote poems, dialogues, narratives, and vignettes to portray the specific phenomena under the study (Denshire, 2013; Mendez, 2013). My stories could possibly contribute to others’ lives by helping them reflect on their experiences and pedagogical practices, generate pedagogical thoughtfulness, and empathise the shared meanings and values (Hayler, 2011). It was helpful to present my voice through first person accounts, confess my weaknesses, and liberate from chains of self-limiting thoughts (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Richards, 2008).

One of the most significant advantages of doing “My Autoethnography” was development of a sense of mental emancipation. The self-reflective and reflexive narratives, poems, and art-based writing helped me to understand my role as a learner and a teacher at different stages of life and it impacted my ability to transform agency role from a silent receiver and preacher of knowledge to an integral reflexive thinker (Ellis, 2004; Wall, 2008). The autoethnographic vignettes of different forms helped me to gaze inward and outward making sense of personal experiences in the social, political, and cultural context of Nepal (Belbase, Luitel, & Taylor, 2008). My

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autoethnographic text was a mental recursion of time with archives full of emotions of past experiences, evaluations of contemporary teaching and learning practices, envisioning of new courses of thinking and acting to transform the personal, professional, and social actions (Roth, 2005). The autoethnographic writing was also a part of critical reflection on my practices as a teacher or teacher educator leading to an act of professional development in the long run (Wood, 2016).

Autoethnography is a way to embrace positivity among different research paradigms and find a possible way to integrate multiple viewpoints, beliefs, and practices (Taylor, Taylor, & Luitel, 2012). With the journey of “My Autoethnography” I observed a change in my perceptions, beliefs, values, and actions toward constructivist approach though I might not reach the level of integral aspects of transformative education practice. When I wrote about my experiences and the lessons that I possibly could learn from them, it did not remain just my stories, but it provided me an opportunity to foster a commitment for advanced thinking, reasoning, writing, and acting for change though it might not be visible in many cases. Therefore, writing “My Autoethnography” was a part of developing an understanding of different paradigms and perspectives in qualitative research (Belbase, 2007; Taylor, Taylor, & Luitel, 2012) and qualitatively gauge the personal experiences of learning and teaching mathematics in relation to the paradigms. It was an epoch of self-transformation through reflective and reflexive thinking and writing about experiences and hopes of further learning.

Caveats of “My Autoethnography”

With all the benefits and strengths discussed above, ‘My Autoethnography’ was not beyond limitations.

The focus of “My Autoethnography” was to present my stories as a foreground with major issues and practices of learning and teaching mathematics, for example, one-way communication as a method of teaching and independent collaborative group works as method of learning mathematics. It was a partial archive of my professional and personal self in the context (Roth, 2005). The archival of method of teaching as preaching was not connected to learning of mathematics. The collaborative group work as method of learning mathematics was not connected to the classroom practice in general. The autoethnographic vignettes could not bring them together as integrated approach to teaching and learning mathematics. I was too critical to the instructive method of teaching and too positive to the self-organized collaborative groups to learn mathematics. I could not find a link in between these two approaches in “My Autoethnography”. I lost the sense of the foreground of my experience to portray the theory-practice connection bringing the broader social, cultural and political context in the background (Denshire, 2013).

I thought that autoethnography allows fictive, imaginative, and reflective expressions in writing and art. With this view, I wrote some reflective narratives on

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my past experiences in a mystical way where the readers could easily get lost of the connection of such expressions to the overall flow of life story. For example, I was not sure if readers could make sense of ‘parallels’ between a child’s play and Shiva’s dance. The emotional expression of losing a toy in childhood and its connection to Shiva’s tandav (a form of eternal dance) seemed too mystical in expression and senseless to some readers. It was mystical in the sense that it linked the objectual phenomenon in the childhood play to God’s miracle of eternity in the ‘dance’. I was a bit more imaginative to express the mystical relations without being conscious of the two worlds – phenomenal world and noumenal world (Kant, 1992) and it could not give explicit meaning in everyday experiences.

While writing autobiographical vignettes and making connection to the theories or literature, there was a chance of making false connection or forceful connection. While doing this, either I synthesized the life stories in such a way that they fit into the theory or a theory was sought to make fit into the story. Both actions diverted me as an autoethnographer away from the main issues that I wanted to emphasize and gave meaning to my real-life experiences. The connection between the experience of recursive mind and the related theory resorted into the imaginative world that sometimes it was hard to grasp in the real-life experience of learning and teaching mathematics. For example, I tried to make connection between my experience of being treated by a tantric (Dhami) and learning mathematics. The rhythm of his mantra, the musical beat of his dhyangro (a kind of drum used by the tantric), and the number seven he was using for doing things (Belbase, 2006) seemed forcefully connected. The imagery of tantric treatment to illness, repeated each procedure seven times, and sense of number in the tantra was beyond the scope of interpretation. Such imaginative connection did not have a meaningful relation to learning and teaching mathematics and related activities in the classroom although it might have a spiritual element (Long, 2008).

I wrote some personal stories that were based on real experience in of classroom, for example, Mr. Pravat’s teaching of mathematics in 1985, out of classroom experience of playing (gambling) coins (ghuchchi), and observing carpenter’s work (Belbase, 2006, pp. 45-48). My stories were more of personal indulgence (Humphreys, 2005) in revealing some thoughtful experiences that might have some value in relation to learning mathematics, but that was not explicit in terms of concepts, procedures, and process of doing such mathematics within and out of classroom. The stories were more expressions of events than the interpretation of meanings, processes, and outcomes. An autoethnographer should be able to move beyond the phenomenal description of events to the interpretive and critical accounts of activities, concepts, processes, and outcomes (Denshire, 2013). I feel that most of the stories presented in “My Autoethnography” revealed self-indulgence in telling personal stories without analysing concepts and meanings (Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2000). Their connection to literature was superficial bridge that could not transcend across the disciplines, practicality of doing mathematics, and performing teaching and learning mathematics (or other subjects).

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“My Autoethnography” was a portrayal of my personal stories in relation to self and others. Those stories were connected to the social, cultural and political contexts, events, and actions. While writing my autobiographical vignettes, there were some situations in which I self-disclosed sensitive issues in relation to relationship between students (myself and other students), student-teacher relation (the relation between myself and teachers), and relation between family members (e.g., a child and parents, siblings, etc.). The mood while writing the autobiographical vignettes might be at the level of peak with emotions attached to the experiences. These emotions might not be the permanent beliefs, but momentary and contextual. Hence, the emotional experiences at one time did not have the same meaning or were not relevant at all in the other time. In this sense, I did not feel comfortable to reveal those sensitive issues publicly in an autoethnographic writing even if they were in the metaphorical sense. I still feel vulnerable to be caught up in relational disputes due to self-disclosure of such issues that might be misinterpreted by the readers (Allen-Collinson, 2012).

The autoethnographic vignettes, narratives, poems, stories, and other forms of writing connected my ‘self’ to other ‘selves’. When I told my stories through these varieties of writings, I told stories of people who were in connection to my life as a friend, a relative, a teacher, or the other. Therefore, these stories were not just my stories, but they were stories of the ‘ethnographic other’ too (Roth, 2010). Anybody familiar to me can easily find out who the ‘others’ are in my stories, even with their pseudonyms. For example, I wrote a story about a teacher (Pravat) and his teaching mathematics on a day in 1985. Anybody who knew about the school, teachers, and context, might easily discover who the teacher was. This can be a serious ethical issue of disclosing the ‘other’ through my personal stories (Allen-Collinson, 2012). I portrayed some relational experiences of observing my daughter in her play and interpreted it in relation to my childhood and then interrelated to a theory (Capra, 1989). Using family member as visible or invisible subject of study without being able to get informed consent (even as a parent) could be an issue in a qualitative research and therefore, it could be an issue in autoethnography as well (Chang, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Roth, 2010). Hence, some stories of confessions I wrote about my ‘self’ eventually returned to others and might have affected the ‘other’ (Derrida, 1998) in a negative way because of negative connotations although the purpose was to generate an awareness.

FINAL REFLECTION ON “MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY”

The major caveats of “My Autoethnography” were associated with the extent of focus in writing the narratives, mystical expressions relating childhood play with Shiva’s dance, imaginative connections between events of different time, indulgence on personal stories to connect with theories, self-disclosure of sensitive issues, and ethical issues related to the narrative expressions about the others. Despite these caveats, “My Autoethnography” helped me to see not only to the past and present,

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but also it opened my eyes to envision the future in terms of learning and teaching mathematics. The writing of different forms of narratives in “My Autoethnography” has merits in terms of access to personal private world, thick and rich experiential data, a variety of textual expressions, critical self-assessment of my works, and a sense of mental emancipation. I conclude the chapter with the following poetic narrative about “My Autoethnography”.

For some, it is evocative
Sometimes, hyper subjective
For others, a legitimate strategy
Transcending intersubjectivity.

Vision of canonical action
Inner ‘self’, a manifestation
Amid frown and reaction
In and out border, ramification.

Observed-observer, a tension
The mental time and recursion
In the distant ‘self’ and ‘other’
Kaleidoscopic collage of color.

Searching the meaning of ‘self’
In the stories that others tell
Nuance and rhythm of living
It’s a revelation and healing.

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