Becoming an activist-scholar through Pedagogy of the Oppressed: An autoethnographic account of engaging with Freire as a teacher and researcher

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This paper contributes an autoethnographic account of how Paulo Freire's work shapes understandings of education, social change and the possibilities and practices of social research. Drawing on connections between anthropology and education (Schultz, 2014) that underpin Pedagogy of the Oppressed (McKenna, 2013), I explore spaces and practices through which Freire's seminal text provided me with the critical consciousness to interrogate the human experience of education and learning, and to question my practice as I transitioned from teacher to researcher, paying particular attention to learning through discomfort (Boler, 1999). The paper therefore contributes an applied contemporary reading of Pedagogy of the Oppressed to demonstrate its continued significance for theory and practice in formal and nonformal education, and its relevance for reimagining research practice. As a form of critically engaged reflective scholarship, the autoethnographic enquiry asks educators and researchers to question their own conceptualisations and practices of knowledge and research to consider a significant and urgent proposition: how we do the work to understand education and our imaginations of what and how it might become.

Keywords: *autoethnography, Freire, discomfort, activism, research practice, education*

Introduction

Paulo Freire's analyses and insights of working with marginalised communities places the human at the heart of our understandings of learning and education. As a teacher, academic and researcher, engaging with Freire as philosophical anthropology (Gadotti, 2017) for educators reframed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the foundation for a manifesto of critically conscious pedagogy within all forms and spaces of education and research. When I realised Freire's critiques about education and imaginations of its possibilities evolved through work with communities rather than school-based teaching but that his arguments were integral to our thinking and practice in both contexts, my journey became a pursuit for reimaginations of education and the creation, construction and production of knowledge. In short, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* transformed my understanding of education into a politicised human experience and living pedagogy that *necessarily* reaches far beyond schools and schooling.

In this paper, I contribute an autoethnographic reflection of developing as an educator and researcher through Freire's pedagogy, drawing on my work in three different contexts: school-based teaching and higher education in England and research in low income communities in the global South. I argue that autoethnography enables us to reimagine and engage with Freire as a living pedagogy of discomfort, a process that is a necessary guiding principle for continuing to reimagine how we educate and research. The connections drawn between discomfort and praxis in different educational contexts present an original contribution to the study of Freire's work, particularly relevant to educators engaging in educational *and* community-based research and/or teacher education.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the theoretical thread Freire built between anthropology and education to situate the contribution within studies of adult learning and education, and to begin the conceptualisation of activist-scholarship. The connection between anthropology and education is further developed in the next section as I reflect on autoethnography as a method of enquiry through which

researchers reflect critically on their own practice and understandings of education and learning. I provide an overview of the contexts that provide the setting for the analysis: school-based teaching and teacher education; social action and activism; and community-based research in low- and middle-income countries. I conclude by reflecting on how Freire's work contributed to my understanding and practice of activist-scholarship, calling for intentional engagement with discomfort as necessary within Freirean praxis.

Anthropology and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

As the founder of an 'educational movement' (McKenna, 2013), Paulo Freire continues to be integral to the thinking and practice of students, educators and practitioners across the world, as is evident in this special issue. Before charting how *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* continues to shape my thinking and practice across different roles in education and research, this section introduces the anthropological underpinnings of Freire's work that can so often be neglected (see McKenna, 2013). Being explicit about the anthropological nature of Freire's work offers important insights into educators' ideas and beliefs and how they are created.

Theories and studies of adult education can benefit from anthropological engagements because they provide insight into how those who create, enact and develop education think about their practice and the ideas that shape what they do. Freire shows us that the educator's understanding of education and the position they take through their pedagogy is the foundation for how education is experienced by both teacher and student. Indeed, Mayo (2020, p457) offered a careful reminder of the many dualisms at play within Freirean praxis, noting that 'personal experiences also offer specific contexts for praxis' and processes of 'relearning.' Recognising the need to revisit experience (through autoethnography) to interrogate how knowledge is created and why we think in a certain way (Allman, 1999) presents new questions for understanding the materiality of how educators' theoretical, cultural, political beliefs are developed and sustained. Diverging from the suggestion that 'contradictions of opposites' are reconciled within praxis (Mayo, 2020, p457), I argue that autoethnography can deepen understanding of how troublesome emotions associated with conflict and opposition are critical to learning specifically because discomfort and the emotive dimensions of our work can be productive (Underhill,

2019b): in other words, reflexive engagement with opposition and contradiction provide the emotive impetus for critical thought and lead us towards praxis.

Through this paper's anthropological perspective of an educator's developing philosophy, I offer two significant contributions to our understandings of adult education, and to related fields such as teacher education: first, in increasingly complex times where Left and Right are pitted against each other through popular discourse in ways that are detracting from the possibility of revolution, engaged reflections of coming to understand our role as educators in systems of power and oppression are a necessary reminder of Freire's commitment to transformation through education so that we question our own; second, ethnographic reflections that consider knowledge and ideas provide critical insights into the human, lived and affective dimensions of praxis as we encounter our own experiences of 'problem-posing' education and transformative action (Freire, 1970).

With its commitment to community dialogue, cultural analysis and the lived experience of oppression, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is an anthropological critique of education and its possibilities. By engaging with communities through a people-centred pedagogy, Freire exposed how systems of education dehumanise and divide to ensure 'what serves the interest of one group disserves the interest of others' (Freire, 1970, p. 126). For teachers today, recognising this power differential as a form of everyday violence when working *within* the formal education system begins with understanding John Dewey's position that education can never be neutral (Dewey, 1916; Apple, 2003), and is the foundation for committed and critically engaged practice. Essentially, Freire's ethnographic account of community-based pedagogy led me to understand that schools are political spaces where educators can control the ideas and imaginations of future generations, often unknowingly and without question. I will argue that thinking about these questions, and working through them through research, is the basis for engaged activist-scholarship that engages critically with how we do the work for reimagining education.

Freire's grounding in anthropology and theories of knowledge establishes 'a method of investigation, research and evaluation in the area of education' that has been adopted across disciplines and

global contexts (Gadotti, 2017, p. 19). Anthropology can help us to ask questions about where our ideas and beliefs have come from and how we engage in a personal practice of problem-posing pedagogy that challenges our own thinking and practice. It is to this task that the rest of this paper turns, beginning with an introduction to autoethnography in educational research and the approach taken in this paper.

Autoethnographic enquiry for reimagining education

Shaped by accounts of anthropology, education and adult learning, this paper contributes an autoethnographic account of challenging and creating ideas of what education is and could be through the lens of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I begin by establishing how autoethnography can illuminate understandings of education and its possibilities by educators offering their own critical reflections of how their beliefs about education developed. I then introduce the spaces through which Paulo Freire's seminal text challenged my understanding of education and enabled me to establish my own critical sense of how and why we seek to understand the world through academic research, within and beyond the discipline of education.

Before beginning, a note on terminology: I recognise that the term 'educator' often includes those who work with communities. In this paper, I consider how ideas and imaginations of education are created in different contexts so my use of 'educator' applies to both formal and nonformal settings (see Freire, 1992). However, reference to students specifically denotes learners in formal settings to reflect on the conventional (dominant) representation of a teacher-pupil /educator-student relationship. Further, I use 'activism' and 'activists' within this paper alongside and within discussions of critical thinking in relation to social action, noting the Freirean perspective that these terms reflect practice rather than praxis (Freire, 1970; Mayo 2020).

As a form of anthropological research, autoethnography illuminates lived experiences from a subject-researcher perspective, thereby contributing understandings of how education can confront issues of power (Reed-Danahay, 2009). Drawing on the presence of the situated self presents a more complete picture of knowledge, one that has a framework that includes experiences, histories and memories which are inseparable from the research process (Coffey, 1999). Autoethnography,

therefore, contributes detailed explorations of an educator's practice and thinking with the recognition that both are shaped by their own historicised experience of education.

Within educational research, autoethnography has been used to explore teaching practice in schools and universities (Granger, 2011; Wilkinson, 2020) and as an approach to reflective practice (Earl & Ussher, 2016). However, reflective practice is not necessarily critically engaged; it could be argued that it has been operationalised within a performative education system in ways that ensure the reproduction of teacher performance. For instance, reflective practice, as its 'fuzzy' (Colin et al, 2013, p. 109) name suggests, focuses on what an educator *does*. The lack of integration of theory and practice within developing professionals' reflections suggests they may pause and stop but not account for their thinking (see Thompson & Pascal, 2012). In other words, despite aiming for rigour within a process of meaning-making (Rodgers, 2002) reflective practice can be descriptive, failing to consider how and why particular ideas that underpin practices are formed. In the performative educational regime within England's schools characterised by Ball (2003), it could be argued that reflective practice within a performance management process is less likely to encourage educators to engage with ideas of knowledge and power that might challenge the discourses that ensure acquiescence within the system.

As a method that also relies on accounts of first-hand experience, the critiques of reflective practice outlined above are relevant for the practice of autoethnography, particularly given that personal accounts are situated within the researcher's lived experience. In this paper, autoethnography is employed to promote thought and interrogate experience without the intention for generalisability. It still requires rigour in how I approach and consider my data, recognising the potential influences of bias and memory, and raises specific concerns around ethical practice. For example, in referring to my own experience as an educator and researcher, I draw on the lives of others (see Tolich, 2010). Therefore, despite the emphasis being on my reflection, I have taken conscious steps to remove features that could identify those within the stories I tell.

When enacted through Freirean critical pedagogy as a form of praxis that is intentional and transparent in its politics, autoethnography can

be a valuable method of research because it recognises that 'learning *about* is not enough: we must also learn *from*' (Granger, 2011, p. 13, emphasis in original). For educators, this is critical to recognising that our experiences and philosophies are situated and relational. Adopting autoethnography as a tool for critical reflection, this paper offers new directions for teacher and adult education by reframing the conversation as a self-directed enquiry into an understanding of how the ideas that underpin an educator's practice emerge and evolve with and through work with others and their perspectives. For adult education, including teacher educators, engaging with personal accounts of the learning that happens through life and that widens our perspectives (Bateson, 1994) presents opportunities to reflect on the experiences that shape, determine and constrain imaginations of the possible.

Drawing connections between Freire's philosophical anthropology and educators' practices of critical reflection deploys autoethnography in an explicitly political way. In revealing personal experience and positionalities, autoethnography is a method that has ethical considerations for the educator and researcher (Wilkinson, 2020) who continues to work with communities, schools, teachers and within academia. Although there are risks associated with sharing personal experience in a work capacity (Earl & Ussher, 2016), my decision to pursue this method of research is directly related to my experience of reimagining the purpose of education and engaging in activist-scholarship (Schultz, 2014) that is intentional, critically engaged and necessary to navigate the discomfort I have felt working within the neoliberal educational system. My reasoning is twofold: first, sharing the process of reimagining my own understanding of education is relevant for other educators and student teachers in that it offers points of entry for others to critically engage with their own thinking and practice in ways that can navigate their own experiences; second, my experience provides a case study of how Freirean pedagogy of activist-scholarship can be intentionally multi-disciplinary and begin to dismantle inequalities within how we think about education and educational research.

Intentionality is critical to conceptualising Freirean activist-scholarship because it leads autoethnography to the 'relational dimension' of praxis and the notion that 'reflection on action must be allied to political action' (Mayo, 2020, p456). Being conscious about reflection generates the possibility for change because 'praxis... requires theory to illuminate it'

(Mayo, 2020, p457). Although theorising experience can be troublesome and uncomfortable (Underhill, 2019a), being intentional about our work and its politics can be empowering for educators; critical reflection can lead to new imaginations and the possibility to apply new ideas to multiple contexts through engaged interdisciplinary collaboration and 'co-produced' (Bell & Pahl, 2018) research. By engaging in the practice of autoethnography, the paper invites other educators to offer their journey to becoming part of the Freirean movement to illustrate possibilities for change and is, therefore, an intentionally political act.

Methodology in research is deeply political. Without recounting the well-established qualitative versus quantitative debate (see Brannen, 2017), it is widely recognised that competing discourses determine what counts as knowledge (Foucault, 1994) and that this subsequently shapes what counts as research. This paper, therefore, is shaped by a politics of method that is also Freirean in nature: challenging ideas by engaging with multiple understandings and truths, exploring complexity and learning (or unlearning) from unintentional but sometimes troubling moments within the research process. A significant part of this politics is recognising complexity associated with the contexts in which we create ideas about the world.

The three contexts explored in this paper each illustrate the enduring relevance of Freire's work for anyone thinking about learning, education and social change. Different ideas from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are woven into my reflections of that context as particularly significant to developing my thinking. The data derives from documentation related to recording professional development (a standard practice within the teaching profession in England), research diaries kept during my doctoral research and ongoing projects, and notes taken during the different readings of Freire's work. The reflections are shaped by my personal experiences and understandings and offer insights that cannot be generalised to the wider population or to other researchers or educators: the contributions are offered as examples of how repeated and continuous engagement with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a necessary endeavour for any educator committed to transformation because interpretations continue to change with our lived experiences.

Beginning, perhaps obviously, with schools, I discuss how the notions of docility and internal conflict emerged through my experience of teaching

in schools both as a teacher and teacher educator. The next section reflects on my experience of learning beyond the classroom, picking up on Freire's commitment to praxis and the imperative of critical thinking within social action. By recognising that learning can be constrained (see Underhill, 2019b), we see the continued relevance of Freire's thinking today: we can become 'a prisoner in a circle of certainty' (1970, p. 21) by being unthinking and unquestioning. Bringing these contexts together, the final section draws on Elizabeth Dauphinée's (2013) autoethnographic account from International Relations to reflect on research with a low-income community group in South Africa and the broader issue of scholarly activity, drawing connections between emotion and understanding (Underhill, 2019a) through notions of power, knowledge, emotion and humanity.

Schools of docile bodies

Discourses of formal education continue to be dominated by the 'banking method' of teacher as expert placing deposits in the 'vessels' of the unthinking student population (Freire, 1970). As a manifestation of a 'market logic' which has been applied to education through neoliberal and neoconservative education policies (Gandin & Apple, 2002, p. 103), the conception of education has been transformed into schooling which 'serves the interest of the state' (Giroux, 2001, p. 241) by ensuring the next generation is ready to enter the neoliberal economy. This hegemony of dialogue is, according to Freire, the key to the myth of possibility and to a dehumanising education: 'one of the methods of manipulation is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success' (Freire, 1970, p. 130).

The notion of personal success permeates throughout the educational system, bringing with it a myriad of practices that embed judgement and comparison of staff and students. Data produced to report outcomes in English schools, for instance, measures and compares students, teachers, departments and schools against previous performances, future targets, and their peers, and is monetised to varying degrees through teacher performance related pay (Ball, 2015). The manipulation, to draw on Freire again, manifests as what Ball (2003, p. 220) explores as teacher 'performativity', leading some to question whether a particular educational practice is 'being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared?'

My own experience of the interminable pursuit of demonstrable successful outcomes reflects how discourses of education instil performative cultures and have the power to manipulate those within the profession, resulting in the reproduction of obedient 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977) and practices of self-regulation (Ball, 2003; 2015). Having developed into an apparently 'outstanding' practitioner (because so many of my students achieved above their expected target grades) I became a mentor, coach and adviser working with teachers with different levels of experience. I believed myself to be a 'thinking' and 'questioning' (Freire, 1970) person. After all, I was an active volunteer for various humanitarian and human rights organisations and a regular attendee at protests against, for example, rising global inequality, the Iraq War and the continued occupation of Gaza. For the English Language and Literature students in my majority white-European school, I planned schemes of work based on books that told stories of refugees and asylum seekers, of street children and struggle, and of places and people that raised awareness of various social inequalities. On the surface, the inclusion of 'other' stories, lives, cultures and voices went some way to 'decolonising' my curriculum (for a discussion within Australian schools see, McLean Davies et al, 2021). However, looking back through Freire, hooks (1994) and Hall (1997), I questioned the extent to which my students gained an anti-racist understanding of English Literature and Language. Critical literacy, as Mayo (2020, p461) notes, reminds us that 'one can read the word but not necessarily read the world while doing so.' Indeed, 'the stories students are exposed to significantly impact on the ways they understand and make meaning of the worlds they inhabit' (McLean Davies et al, 2021, p816).

As we studied the novels and poems, we engaged in dialogue about how the texts might shape students' understandings of the world. However, the interactions were conditioned by the language of assessment (objectives, targets, success criteria) and the questions I, as the teacher, felt were important. Although 'meaning making can also occur within "banking education" (Mayo, 2020, p462), the performative neoliberal regime demands students remain 'docile listeners' (Freire, 1970, p62) rather than co-constructors of a dialogue where they could 'come to feel like masters of their thinking' (Freire, 1970, p. 105). While there are many educators who engage with Freire to shape their resistant practice, the fact I was attempting to do things differently but remained unsure

whether I was getting it right tapped into 'a deep and dark professional secret that every teacher knew about but which no one ever talked about': the 'internal conflict' between what we are told to do and what we believe about education (Muchmore, 2002, p. 2-3). Together with Hall (1997), Freire's insights showed that the practice of expanding a reading list was not enough: I was thinking critically about the content of my subject, but I was at the beginning of my journey to Freirean praxis: I needed to go further in a process of continued learning and unlearning with my students, engaging in dialogue that took action in a process of transformation of the world where I would resist the 'spectacle of the other' (Hall, 1997).

One defining experience in my school-based career deepened my sense of internal conflict and the materiality of performativity as experienced by students and teachers. On summer results day in the late-2000s, I received the final grades for two exam groups. Two young men with differing learning and behavioural conditions, Paul and Tyson (pseudonyms), achieved three grades higher than predicted, reflecting their growth in confidence and self-belief. Yet according to all measures of success in England's secondary schooling, they had still 'failed'. Reflections at the time and subsequently revealed my anger, frustration and growing discomfort with the realisation that in *this* system, many will never achieve the hegemonic measure of success. Through the lens of Freirean pedagogy, however, feeling anger and frustration did not go far enough: understandings of education need to be challenged through Freire's notion of radical 'committed involvement' (Freire, 1970, p. 51). In my case, I chose to leave the system of 'schooling' (Giroux, 2001) in an attempt to reimagine the internal conflict, I was feeling about what it meant to be an 'outstanding' or 'effective' teacher (Ball, 2015) as an opportunity through which to learn and unlearn attachment to particular ideas and imaginations (Underhill, 2019a) of education and social transformation.

Ten years on, as a university-based teacher educator working with post-graduate students, the space through which to bring Freire's principles to the next generation of teachers is diminishing. For example, my decision to use the term 'resistance' in sessions about the National Curriculum for English in schools was part of my committed involvement to critically-engaged praxis. In one teaching session, students reflected on the content of subject English through

Freirean notions of banking and problem-posing education and critical consciousness, and bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). Many commented (verbally and via email) that the critical questions posed by Freire and hooks, underpinned by conscious struggle, made them question both content and practice, from choice of texts and authors to pedagogy and teaching strategies, how they questioned, grouped students and thought about assessment. However, one student returned the following week to say her husband, also a secondary English teacher, said such conversations were 'dangerous' and she 'should be careful' of this kind of thinking when she got into school 'properly' (personal communication, 2019). As McKenna (2013, p. 450) illustrates, Freirean pedagogy requires more than recognition: it requires us to 'make trouble', to keep engaging critically, developing theories and critical practice. Whether teaching English or Biology - the case Freire deploys in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992, p. 68) - we must remember the content cannot be 'understood apart from its historic-social, cultural and political framework'.

Reflecting on my role from a Freirean perspective shows me teacher educators need to create the conditions for troublesome teachers whose ideas of revolution and resistance are sustained in schools, continuing to evolve and respond to changing practices and experiences of oppression from across the education system. Amid an increasingly neoliberal and hostile higher education context in England, the transformative praxis beyond schools and schooling is ever more urgent and necessary. The next section establishes collective action and adult education as key to developing troublesome knowledge and pedagogies of resistance, focusing on how my understanding of learning in informal contexts began during my teaching practice but remains core to how I continue to reimagine its possibilities.

Learning to learn through social action

Having experienced the uncomfortable disconnect between beliefs about teaching and the expectations associated with school-based practice (Muchmore, 2002), Freire's position that 'liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (1970, p. 60) struck me particularly deeply: the discomfort I felt when navigating the tension of classroom practice and activism provided the space necessary to develop and maintain radical values. In this section,

I draw on my experience of engaging in social action (social movements, campaign groups, voluntary organisations and charities) to illustrate the continued influence of Freire in my journey to reimagining education and academic work.

During my time teaching in a large state-maintained school teaching 11–16-year-olds, I established a small but committed youth action group. The young people developed into campaigners and activists, and I witnessed their criticality develop through participating in action and thinking related to inequality and struggle, an observation that laid bare the constraints that 'schooling' (Giroux, 2001) places on students' imaginations of a different world and 'inhibits their creative power' (Freire, 1970, p. 58).

The experience exposed a contrast in dialogic practice between activism and formal education settings that would go on to shape my academic research. Within the activist groups (including the school-based group that included some of the same students to whom I taught English), we talked about power, inequality and marginalisation, holding small acts of public campaigning, resistance and solidarity. Contrast this with my classroom teaching where I - as the teacher - 'owned' the dialogue within the classroom: I decided the enquiries, directed the questions and invited participation. No matter how student-centred I made my lessons, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exposed the transactional system that was reinforced by policies, practices and a 'pedagogic-bent' designed to '*prevent* (counter-hegemonic) thinking' (Harley, 2012, p. 18, emphasis in original). As Dewey (1916) established, education has long been the tool through which to control the masses, albeit under the veil of promoting individual freedom: students had been 'reduced to things', constrained vessels rather than liberated humans (Freire, 1970, p. 84).

Freire challenged my imaginations of education and pedagogy to be more human, affective and committed. Through small acts of resistance, I had encountered the powerful learning that happens beyond the classroom and had my eyes opened to the possibilities of lifelong learning in social movements and activist groups (see Welton, 1993; Foley, 1999; Jesson and Newman, 2004; Hall and Turay, 2006; Leach and Scoones, 2007; Beaumont, 2010; Ollis, 2011). Although I was yet to find the language to articulate the unease and discomfort of learning (Boler, 1999) about my own part in sustaining dominance (Zembylas

& McGlynn, 2012), it had become clear that deep and critical reflection on educative practice and its philosophical underpinnings is necessary if educators are to become conscious of their own role in preventing critical thought and the subsequent perpetuation of inequality and oppression, and that recognising alternative spaces of learning was a key place to start.

A central tenet of Freirean pedagogy is the commitment to revolutionary praxis - to 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 33) that is distinct from activism as 'action for action's sake' (p. 69). Given ideas, beliefs and emotions are entwined (Melucci, 1985; Boler, 1999; Underhill, 2019b), we need to learn through the discomfort associated with challenging our part in the 'circle of certainty' where we make our own truths (Freire, 1970, p. 21) about the world and of our place in its recreation. Inspired and troubled by the cognitive dissonance of being a schoolteacher reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I was compelled to question my beliefs about the human experience of truth creation and reproduction. Freire's (1970, p. 84) exploration of the 'anthropological character' of education as situated within lived experience exposed the schooling-education dichotomy. I was forced to acknowledge how my imaginations of education were constrained within and reinforced by the performative game of which I had become a key player as I participated in performance management systems, rating teachers based on observations of individual lessons. Just as activists' learning can be constrained by their attachment to particular truths because they have lived histories with affective and emotional ties (Underhill, 2019a; 2019b), the same is true for educators: confronting the truth of why we what we do *in that way* is the foundation for developing a continuously evolving and living pedagogy. In the next section, I demonstrate how these reflections led me to reconsider how we do community-based research before revisiting the possibilities for adult education.

Engaged research: the necessity of encountering Freire

In her autoethnographic narrative of research during the Bosnian war, Elizabeth Dauphinée (2013) finds her position as an academic confronted by the man who would, in usual academic writing, have been described as her 'key informant'. He challenges her: "you're building your whole career on what I lost, and you never came to even ask me

what it was like" (Dauphinée, 2013, p.167). Coming to terms with the realisation that she built a successful career on the trauma of others, Dauphinée's rejection of traditional academic emotional distance by writing the self (Coffey, 1999) into the story of the research forces her readers to confront how we design, implement and disseminate work based on the lives of the 'other'.

> *Violence must be quantifiable in your world. It must count bodies, burned houses, livestock, and graves – lost libraries, churches and synagogues, mosques. It must count the flood of refugees driven across the border from their own fields into those of others – into fields that do not want to shelter them. You have no scale with which to weigh the contents of heart or soul. And so, you can identify victims – static, immobile entities – but you have not asked yourself about the violence the committer of violence has done to himself, and you have not bothered to theorise that (Dauphinée, 2010, p. 800).*

Although the narrative form of Dauphinée's *Politics of Exile* (2013) contrasts with the theoretical exegesis of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, both scholars place themselves within the research through anthropology, offering a commitment to understanding the human experience from a position of humility and humanity. Critical anthropological enquiry encourages people to reflect on their 'situationality to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it' (Freire, 1970, p. 90). Within the academy, this forced me to question practices of engaging in academic scholarship that would encounter suffering and trauma and report on the most raw cases of human existence through disconnected prisms of significance, objectivity, replicability and rigour, rather than empathy, care or humanity. Along with Freire's call to act upon being challenged, Dauphinée's critique of academic research became a critical backdrop to the final context – exploratory research with a low-income community in South Africa.

Having established connections with a group that had developed community-led initiatives to reduce gender-based violence, we gathered in a two day workshop to explore our work together on understanding their approaches to community-led learning and recovery. I recalled Freire argue 'investigators… never forc[e] themselves, but act as sympathetic observers with an attitude of understanding towards

what they see' (Freire, 1970, p. 91, emphasis in original), establishing the foundation for Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Torres, 1992; Macdonald, 2012) through his exposition of power, inequality and the possibilities offered by community-led development. Despite the many examples of PAR in practice, anthropologists have found themselves 'troubled about how best to do this work', questioning how to balance institutional constraints within the academy, practitioners' knowledge and situated, lived knowledge (Schultz, 2014, p. 228). However, revisiting Freire and Dauphinée during my time in South Africa, also exposed the lack of emotion in accounts of participatory and community-based research that left me unable to explain the work we wanted to do together in traditional language of academic work:

> *I know there's something different, magical, transformative here, but it doesn't fit within the 'normal' academic work… We recognised the moments of connecting to how we feel inside, slowing down. Of looking people in the eye, of sharing in vulnerability and of speaking aloud… Today made me realise the development paradigm is 'I am doing community education', but what if I don't actually understand/speak to what the community is? (author's field notes).*

The final session of the workshop followed what the group often refer to as body work, intended to develop trust, understanding and a shared humanity. The shared reflexive dialogue revealed the community's belief that these activities were essential for them to feel my vulnerability as they shared their 'living testimonies'. I was reminded of Freire's (1970, p. 95) seemingly simple position that investigator and community work 'always as a team' and that the relationship be based on humanity and understanding. However, it was only through critical autoethnography – the practice of stepping back, interrogating my thinking and experiences - that I was able to acknowledge the value of my own vulnerability and emotions to co-creating disruptive and transformative research.

Writing the self into the representation of community-based research by thinking with autoethnography encouraged me to consider how my presence in the field impacts the researcher and the community (Coffey, 1999), and could respond to calls for a commitment to praxis within the academy (Crowther, Galloway & Martin, 2005). As a developing researcher, bringing together Freire's exposition of power

within community education and research with Dauphinée's (2010, 2013) example of purposeful autoethnography challenges the dualism of the 'researcher' and 'researched', demanding a deeper interrogation of the emotional work associated with critically engaged scholarly investigation. For me, much of the emotional work centred on a growing discomfort with the dominant representations of 'success' in education and research, along with a commitment to scholarly activism and the exploration of the many other possibilities of knowledge and ways of knowing. Reimagining discomfort as pedagogically productive (Underhill, 2019b) generates new ways of thinking about research practices (such as 'participation') where embodied and lived experiences are key to continuous, shared and mutual learning. Freire shows us this recognition of humanity within research is critical to education and knowledge, from conceptualisation to practice. In the next and concluding section, I return to Freire's important linking of education to the human experience through the notion of activist-scholarship, summarising how autoethnography has enabled my journey towards becoming an activist, scholar and researcher who advocates for a reimagined approach to educational research as a form of Freirean living pedagogy.

Conclusion: Activist-scholarship as Freire's living pedagogy

This paper invites further interrogation of the disconnect many educators feel between 'classroom focuses and the world out there' (Benford, 2015, p. 44), suggesting that to ignore the emotional character of our work is to strip education and research of their connection to the human experience. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exposed many ways ideas and practices of education dehumanise both the oppressed and the oppressors, a recognition that reinforces this paper's call to employ critical autoethnography to understand our role as educators and researchers in the (de)humanisation process and how this shapes us and the students and communities with whom we work.

In my case, Freire's language was initially confronting, and necessarily so. His direct challenges were key to recognising the politics of schooling and understanding that being troubled by some of the educational practices was the first stage in becoming an activist-scholar. The term activist-scholarship has gained growing traction since the early 2000s, particularly within the humanities, offering an identification for those

who 'see the value in radical education and the public debate of ideas which challenge the norm' (Chatterton, 2008, p. 421). Although there is clearly a wealth of historical and contemporary literature and theorising on the various notions of transformative social change in a range of academic disciplines, the neoliberal university and marketisation of academic work from research funding to publishing practices arguably constrains ideas and imaginations (see Connell, 2013). Indeed, Choudry (2020, p. 29) highlighted the significant difference between producing knowledge within and for the university in 'self-referential loops of academic scholarship' and academia as 'a space that can be inhabited, occupied, and its resources used for valuable political work' (2020, p. 40), a reflection that is important when considering how ideas are shaped. The feminist movement, for example, was advanced by activist-scholars within different disciplines drawing on women's lived experiences to give voice to the 'concerns of women and girls... to 'reframe' how these issues are perceived and analysed in policy discussions' (Price, 2002, p. 143). However, given academic scholarship remains gendered and racialised (Behl, 2019), even critically engaged enquiries are shaped by unseen structural and systemic conditions that constrain both the content of knowledge and the processes through which it is produced and, as Ball (2012, 2015) notes, reported and measured.

Although qualitative methodologies have been critical to giving voice to marginalised groups by recognising ways of knowing 'that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' (Mason, 2006, p. 1), participatory research has been critiqued for reproducing unequal power relations within communities and the research process itself, eventually becoming co-opted into hegemonic development practice (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The shift to co-production in educational research (Bell & Pahl, 2018) can be viewed as a form of methodological resistance to the 'regular army' of quantitative research (Reinharz, 1990, p. 294), but we cannot be complacent. Critical autoethnography is one tool educational researchers can draw upon to continuously interrogate practices such as participatory research and co-production more deeply and critically to keep questioning how imaginations of ideas, knowledge, practice *and* research evolve and the implications.

My story of activism, education and research come together through Freire to illustrate how adult education is critical to understanding the possibilities for transformative education and research. Freire brings

these spaces together by giving us tools through which to critically engage and reflect. This enquiry shows that becoming an activist-scholar develops through experiences of 'challenging, inspiring and innovating' (Chatterton, 2008, p. 421), learning to reimagine education and research through a living pedagogy where discomfort, troublesome emotions and lived experience continuously pose new questions and imaginations, and are written into the process of reflexivity. As a form of activist-scholarship, this framework asks educators and researchers to question ideas of knowledge and methodology, and to consider how to create a more engaged practice within 'an academic world that encourages a scholar's 'achievement' – measured and evaluated in specific ways that reinforce and reward individualism and competition' (Choudry, 2020, p. 40). However, Freire's exile should serve as a reminder that writing ourselves into the story of how we conceptualise, practice and engage is a political commitment: being willing to take risks with more than our place in the academy's grading and ranking systems (Choudry, 2020) is the foundation of a critical ethic for research and reimagining the possibilities of education from a critical, radical and revolutionary position.

This paper aimed to contribute an autoethnographic account of how educators continue to draw upon Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to understand contexts, practices and possibilities of education and academic research. The process deepened my commitment to Freire's pedagogy and Freirean principles by entering into a dialogic 'encounter' (Boler, 1999) with my own lived experience of education and continued learning, forcing me to question what this means for how I engage in academic scholarship, community-based research and university teaching. The autoethnographic approach argues that educators need to draw on their discomfort to look beyond how we understand education by considering a significant and urgent proposition: how we work to do the work to understand education and our imaginations of what and how it might become.

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