

THE THREE-STEP AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FOR THE UNIVERSITY CLASS*

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This is a brief autoethnographic exercise created for a course on community narratives of Hispanic and Latinx immigrants in Toronto and the GTA (GL/SP 4701 3.0 Community Narratives in the GTA). The exercise is one of several components of the course to prepare students for ethnographic fieldwork. Being a course of the Spanish program, it also focuses on creative writing techniques. However, students from different courses in several disciplines can benefit from a self-exploration exercise like this one, as it can help them to better situate themselves within their cultures and social environments. In addition to this, the group benefits of writing and sharing autoethnographies are multiple and well documented (Tombaro 2016, Starr 2010, Duncan 2004).



The autoethnography is an exciting method of qualitative enquiry into yourself. It offers the possibility to explore your life experience, to recognize its value, to find a voice, and ultimately to become the agent of your own story. It is also a comprehensive exercise in creative non-fiction writing. For courses where ethnographic methods are employed, such as oral history or life story interviewing, the autoethnography is an important step in your preparation. As such, it will help you understand the role and perspective of the participant, and some of the ethical implications of ethnographic methods.

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STEP 1: Your 10-Minute Oral Autobiography

Prepare a 10-minute oral autobiographic presentation.

This will be an opportunity to reflect upon the course of your life as a whole. An autobiographical exercise like this, even if short, may be a difficult task for some people. Sharing your life, its processes, your fears and hopes, can feel intimidating. However, it can also create a sense of solidarity and empathy among your peers. Note, however, that you don't have to share anything you don't want to.

The following questions will help you articulate an oral autobiographical presentation, but before you tackle them, here are some important considerations:

- Don't answer these questions directly. Use them as a guide to articulate an oral story about you.
- Don't over prepare your story for the presentation. You may take some notes and use them as a memory aid as you present, but it is important to be spontaneous and to let the act of oral improvisation stimulate your memory. Some of the greatest moments of this exercise occur when a student says: "now that I'm telling this, I remember that...".
- Subjectivity is important. Try to express what you were feeling, thinking or wishing as you recall some memories.
- The story doesn't have to be linear or chronological. You can, for instance, open with question no. 2 or 3, and then flash back to no. 1 (or any other combination). Regardless of the structure, it is important to cover all the questions.
- Each student will have about ten minutes to present.

1. Who are you, where/who do you come from and how do you identify?
2. One peak moment (or very exciting, positive experience) lived so far was?
3. A turning point, a moment that defined who you are, or radically changed the course of your life, was? How do you feel about it now?
4. If you could change something from your past, what would it be? Why?
5. What is one of your greatest fears in life? Why?
6. Something deeply important for you is?

STEP 2: Write Your Story

Write a brief (1200-1500 words approx.) autobiographical story based on your oral presentation. Use the first person (I).

Here are a few tips to make your story more engaging:

- Maybe some of the questions above were irrelevant for your story or didn't yield anything important to you. Discard them. Consider the whole autobiographical material you used for your presentation but select what you feel defines best the course of your life and who you are at the present moment.
- Think of a structure before you write the story. It can certainly be a chronological account, but you can also be more creative or experimental. In order to achieve this, here are three suggestions of effective and commonly used structures:
 - The story *in medias res* ("in the middle of things"). You start without exposition in a crucial moment of your life, then you flashback to its chronological beginning and continue its narration until the end. You can also keep the narration going from the moment you started until the end with episodic flashbacks to include events lived prior to the starting point (your childhood, youth, etc.). The crucial moment can be the peak event, a turning point, a challenge you had to face, etc. Famous examples of this structure are Homer's *Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or García Márquez' *Hundred Years of Solitude*, but it's also present in myriad episodes of TV series (e.g. *Breaking Bad*, episode 1), in the entirety of a multi-season series (*13 Reasons Why*) or Films (*Star Wars*' episode 4: *A New Hope*).
 - But you might not want to subordinate events of your story to a central one. If this is the case, the **story in vignettes** may be an appropriate structure. Conceive your whole story as a collage of short, self-standing stories or anecdotes of about 200 words each. Put them in the order you prefer (again, it doesn't have to be chronological). Then you can reflect upon them as a whole in a closing paragraph that reveals something about your assemblage, probably addressing question number 6: what is deeply important for you?
 - The circular story. Make the beginning and ending of your story refer to the same episode. This could be as distant as a moment in your childhood or as close as the

moment of writing your autobiography. For instance, you can start in the present, probably addressing questions 5 or 6, then refer to the rest of your biographical material to find an explanation for that present, and then refer it again at the end with new insights or questions.

- Don't make long paragraphs. Long paragraphs (fifteen lines or more) are hard to read.
- When you are satisfied with a draft, forget about it for a day. Then come back to it and revise your grammar and your choice of words, sentence by sentence.

STEP 3: Self Reflection and Cultural Analysis

Based on the following questions, write a short paper (about 1000 words). Submit it along with your story.

1. How did you feel throughout this exercise (reviewing your life as a whole, articulating it as a story, sharing it with the class and the professor, writing about you)?
2. It is often said (or implied) that the course of a subject's life depends on their individual decisions, choices and the exercise of their free will. These decisions, however, are often influenced, or even unconsciously determined, by "external" forces: family traditions, schooling, peer relations and dynamics, religion, politics, advertisements, media, etc. Think of one crucial moment in your story (probably a turning point, a peak event, or something you wish you would have rather avoided) and try to identify what "external" forces may have played a role on how you felt, how you reacted, how the experience settled over time in your memory.
3. What are the narratives behind that force or tradition: how is it articulated, how is it referred to by people important to you? For instance: choosing a program and entering university may have been a turning point in your life. This life decision may have been presented to you all wrapped in narratives of success, the prestige or coolness of university life, a particular vision of the world, portraits of professionals in the field through media (series, films), prospective life scenarios elaborated by family or institutions (i.e., program advertisements or social media), etc. Think (narratively) of what influences were present in a big decision and explain them.

4. How do you feel today about those particular influences? Are they still present? How do you resist or embrace them?
5. Did you gain any insight into your life or your present from this exercise? Explain.

Selected Readings on Autoethnography

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