

## **Scholar Practitioner, reflexive professionals, the ART of autobiographical professional development**

Dr Paul-Alan Armstrong, Senior Lecturer HRM and Leadership, Sunderland Business School, Faculty of Business, Law and Tourism, Reg Vardy Centre, Sir Tom Cowie Campus at St Peter's, St Peter's Way, Sunderland, SR6 0DD, UK

## **Abstract**

This paper reflects upon Davies (2017) proposition of the ethical, values-focussed HR professional by presenting an autobiographical reflexive account of a group of recent Masters graduates who completed a reflexive digital bricolage (Armstrong, 2018) as their final research project (Human Resource Reflective Project). The challenges facing encouraging CPD in students as future professionals beyond the use of learning logs (Holden and Griggs, 2011). This also proposes a method of overcoming and making sense of values (Gardner, 2009) and the struggles for identity, professional development and career development as discussed by Pettica-Harris and McKenna (2013).

Keywords: autobiographical, reflexive account, values, identity struggle

## **1.0 Introduction**

This paper presents the conceptualisation of arts based research methodologies, digital reflection (Kirk and Pitches, 2013; Armstrong, 2015) and professional identity as reflexive digital bricolage. This paper will present the concept of reflexive digital bricolage and its' transformational impact on professional development for professionals working towards a Masters in HRM. This is through the creation of digital reflections using a digital platform MAHARA to make sense of identities by developing their reflexive consciousness as professionals through self-reflection as method (Franks, 2016). This leads to the evolution of the researching professional case history presented by Armstrong and Bryans (2016) and builds on this case history the recipient of the 2017 IFTDO Global HRD Research Excellence Award.

## **2.0 Building the Lens of Reflexive Digital Bricolage: Theoretical Background**

This lens was initially influenced by Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska (1999) who presented the debate on patchworks as artistic imagination in professional development (*presented in this paper as digital reflections*). They present the idea of artistic imagination in respect to writing stories and patchwork text is assembled from the work of others, therefore allowing for multi-voicedness. Even though the use of creative writing has become established in reflective practice (e.g. Bolton, 2010; Hunt, 2013) I argue even though this was the catalyst for this conceptualization as I entered into my own doctoral journey, I argue it is more than creative writing, it is a form of artful auto-ethnography or collaborative auto-ethnography (Blalock and Akehi, 2017). During this journey it became clear to me of the significance of imagination required for reflexivity. Furthermore this collided with the emerging debate on the use of arts based personal cultural texts (Findlay, 2005; 2013) and the increasing recognition of the arts based methodology where the unconscious speaks through metaphor (Hunt, 2006; 2010) and these images allow for translation into thought and language (Vallack, 2017).

The challenges facing CPD and professional development in the form of learning logs has been recognised by Holden and Griggs (2011) and as there is an increasing debate on the use of metaphor in reflective practice (Hunt, 2006; Boud and Hager, 2012; McIntosh, 2008; 2010; Ellis, 2005; Armstrong. 2015) the building of the lens of reflexive digital bricolage is positioned theoretically within the metaphorical paradigm of reflective practice. I would argue reflective practice which is considered in terms of cycles of reflection (for example Kolb Cycle; Gibbs Cycle; Gardner cycle) using diagnostic experiential approaches does have value, however it does not go far enough. The struggle for reflexivity is becoming more widely accepted as the voice of the researching professional is increasingly being recognised as a transformational process.

The building of the lens was two-fold, theoretically position within metaphorical approaches to reflexive practice influenced particularly by Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska (1999); Hunt (2006) and McIntosh (2008; 2010). There is also a methodological positioning of this lens.

### **3.0 Methodological Implications of Reflexive Digital Bricolage**

*'Reflexivity has emerged as the new gold standard for qualitative researchers who reject positivist methodologies and traditional criteria of rigor, reliability and validity (Gabriel, 2018: 137).*

Through a collaborative auto ethnographic methodology (Blalock and Akehi, 2017) this paper will present a reflexive conversation between the module leader who acted as a supervisor for a group of MSc HRM students as a co creation of meaning in terms of professional development. The ART of digital reflection argues reflexive digital bricolage creates reflexive space through Active Research Informed Transformation of professional identity. The learners use a range of diagnostic and creative personal cultural texts (Findlay, 2005; 2013) as data to embody active imagination (Macintosh, 2010) and artistic imagination (Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska, 1999).

The emergence of art based methodologies from notable scholars including Findlay (2005; 2013) Cahbmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2008) where artful ethnography allows for embodiment (Barleet, 2013; Pelias, 2013) is at the heart of reflexive digital bricolage. Central to Professional Development education is reflection and reflexivity and with the emphasis on self-reflection as method (Franks, 2016) this paper argues the use of personal cultural texts including lyrics (Armstrong, 2015; Alexander, 2016), poetry (Saunders, 2003; Burchill, 2010) drawings, photographs, dance and sculpture (Ellis, 2005) develops reflexive consciousness in professionals. The embodiment of a postmodern epistemology allows for the construction of praxis (Eikeland, 2013) as well as providing the Researching Professional with ontological permission to speak in their voice as a form of multi-voicedness.

The embodiment of identity has always fascinated me and the use of artful auto ethnography (Ellis, 2004) as a form of heartfelt consideration of systematic sociological introspection (Ellis, 2009; Goffman, 1959) inspire me to consider my own identity as a teacher and this was at the heart of my thesis and the conceptualization of Songs of Praxis where I visualise identity using lyrical metaphors as embodiment of being and becoming (Armstrong, 2015). This ontological permission to express identity as a poetic allowed for me to be authentic which is how I expressed my affirming of my values (Gardner, 2009; 2014). This

capturing of praxis in an Aristotelian tradition was the epistemology of this conceptualization of reflexive digital bricolage. Increasingly in qualitative studies there is recognition of the influence of the arts for a critical qualitative inquiry and this is further supported by Denzin (2017) who elegantly suggested the epistemological value of critical qualitative studies for exploring social justice and behaviour beyond the positivist need rigour and reliability.

#### **4.0 Background to Human Resource Reflective Project**

The philosophy of the 'Human Resource Reflective Project' module promotes artistic imagination (Winter et al, 1999) and sociological imagination (Gabriel, 2015) enacted through three levels of personal and professional knowledge construction (Eikeland, 2012); reflexive space (philosophy), arts based (methodology), and digital (method). The students use personal 'data' (Armstrong, 2015) developed from reflective 'tools' and data sources including the use of poetics and interpretive poetics (Rogers, 2000; Armstrong, 2015) acting as reflexive accounts (Pelias, 2013). They explore the implications of their personality and preferences on their approach to life and work with the help of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (James and Vinnicombe, 2002). The embracing of poetry (e.g. Burchill, 2010), digital reflection (e.g. Kirk and Pitches, 2013), digital storytelling (e.g. Lambert, 2007), visualization using drawings, photographs (e.g. Gardner, 2014; Bryans and Mavin, 2004), digital visualization using video (e.g. Nelson, 2009) or the use of lyrics (e.g. Armstrong, 2015) are all encouraged.

Arts-based research evokes meanings for the learners which can incite, inspire and provoke (Bochner and Ellis, 2003). Learners are enabled to tell their story as 'Researching Professionals' as reflexive accounts (Pelias, 2013) and explore the biography of researcher identity (Alheit, 2009). The use of digital storytelling (Lambert, 2007) and digital reflection (Kirk and Pitches, 2013) gives the user the 'tools' of critical expression and reflection which allows them to draw out unconscious aspects of their values, beliefs and emotions towards transformation (Ellis, 2004) and critical reflection (Armstrong, 2015).

## 5.0 Discussion and Findings

From the collaborative auto ethnographic conversations an inductive thematic analysis of five life histories of participants was conducted. From the conversations there are four themes which reflect the lens of the participant in their personal transformational journey of building their reflexive digital bricolage.

### ***Anxiety and Confusion***

From the conversations there was a sense of confusion and anxiety in completing this digital reflection:

*“My first initial thought of reflecting upon myself was one of embarrassment and horror. Like drawing a really bad self-portrait. You know the one.....the one you drew as a child, and somehow you have an orange triangle for a nose, sticks for legs and a big potato head. But yet it ends up on the fridge for everyone to see. And then when you're older you look at it and think: "I wish I'd changed the way I did that, that's terrible. I found the beginning particularly challenging, to do something entirely new always is. Reading and researching and re-reading and trying to make sense of what methodologies and method I wanted to use was exhausting. I definitely shouted at my laptop a few times. And got madder when it did not shout back. Mainly because I was frustrated and it meant I could only get mad at myself (Participant A).*

Furthermore;

*Panic. That is the emotion I can recall coursing through me throughout our taught sessions for PGBM86. I had heard the word ‘reflection’ and figured ‘how hard can this be?’ Very, is the answer. My initial reaction to PGBM86 was confusion – I did not understand what the project was supposed to entail and could not wrap my head around how to even start it let alone complete it. Passing this seemed insurmountable. It felt like a physical barrier was between me and completing the project. I loathe feeling stupid and tend to shy away from scenarios in which I may feel that way – you’ll never see me sing at karaoke, for example – but there was no getting away from this. Paul-Alan must have noticed my stricken expression in the classroom as I stared at my notes with utter incomprehension. ‘You’ll get it,’ he said. ‘Trust me, this will all make sense to you.’ Vowing to break the habit of a lifetime and not leave things to the last minute really saved me (Participant B)*

*When we were first given the assessment brief my first thought was that of utter confusion and a completely blank mind. For some reason what we were required to do would simply not sink into my brain and I couldn't make any sense of it. I had never ever completed an assessment like this before in my whole five years of university. Firstly, a huge piece of work where I had to reflect on myself and where the whole assessment was based around me? That was a scary thought, as I do not like talking about myself and this was something I have never had to do in so much detail before. Secondly, an assessment where you were able to use lyrics, poems and images as 'personal data', how bizarre, how on earth could these elements support academic work? Furthermore, exploring my 'me' as a research professional, at first I didn't even consider myself as a researcher, let alone a 'professional' so I was totally lost on how I was going to be able to complete this element of the project (Participant E).*

The responses from the three life histories above imply the emotional impact and struggle for reflexivity which is widely regarded as a consequence of entering into a reflexive space (Burchill, 2010; Armstrong, 2015). There is also consideration given to the sense of vulnerability which is recognised by the scholars of auto ethnography (e.g. Ellis, 2005)

*At the beginning of the assignment I really struggled with what I was meant to be writing about, this was because I felt this exercise was forcing me to bare out my all which I was not comfortable with (Participant C)*

However;

*The Human Resource Reflective Project was a fitting culmination of all of our work on the MSc HRM, building up to this final module. Having come from a teaching background, I thought I was well versed in what it meant to be a reflective practitioner – I was wrong! With hindsight, I realise the sort of reflection I undertook as part of my CPD barely scratched the surface; it was often a tick box exercise, despite my best intentions. Paul introduced me to critical reflection as part of my development as a researching professional and the process has been both challenging and rewarding in equal measure. I found the subject content to be fascinating and not at all how I imagined a module on research to be; it was not the dry, sterile, impartial and scientifically ratified approach to research that I was more familiar with. I personally found the learning around qualitative research deeply enriching and it appeals to me on so many levels; as a values-based approach to ethical practice and as an exciting way of learning about myself and the world around me, in terms of people and cultures. The acknowledgement that we are not robots – that we cannot simply remove ourselves from the process of research - was truly liberating for someone who had previously operated under the mantra of complete objectivity and non-bias in absolutely everything I did relating to my teaching or management practice. (Participant D).*

Reflexivity is a struggle and it can make you feel vulnerable and confused especially if you have not enter into a reflexive dialogic approach. The nature of transformative learning is disruption and confusion as we make sense of our identity and where we are positioned as people and professionals (Eikeland, 2013; Armstrong, 2015).



## **Starting to Make Sense**

The pathway for making sense of this project was the reading and reflective space required (Armstrong, 2015; Burchill, 2010) and this was as a co-creation between learner and supervisor, this co-creation as at the heart of reflexivity (Gabriel, 2018).

*'And then.... when terminologies and methodologies began to make sense, it was a completely different experience. It was as if that young self-portrait was splashed with vibrant colours and swirls of patterns like a firework - once I started writing and reflecting, I couldn't stop' (Participant A)*

*Furthermore the learners fear of how they are seen by others;*

*Not wanting to feel like an idiot in my first supervisor meeting made me go away and read, and at least have my concerns clearly outlined, if nothing else. Throughout my entire undergraduate degree and the majority of my postgraduate studies I have rarely (almost never) gone to a lecturer for help with assignments. With this, I knew I would have to get the most out of my time with Paul-Alan to even have a chance of finishing. Once I had had my initial supervisor meeting and decided to write creatively for my project, things became easier. I stopped focusing on whether what I was doing was 'right' and decided to just get my experiences down on paper. Writing it was cathartic and although it may seem obvious that a reflective project would require reflection, once I stopped viewing it as an assignment to be completed and more of a chance for me to look back at what I had achieved and consider for the first time what I could have done differently, what I had learned from my experiences, it really made me stop and ask myself some tough questions (Participant B).*

This is supported by;

*Therefore as I read through the module guide I started to get even more confused as I read each page. However, what was expected from me became much more clear as we had our various sessions with Paul and as he showed us some work from the previous year students, this helped to put everything into perspective and finally it did not seem as daunting. Although I now understood what was expected from each element, when I came to write element 1 I stumbled and hit somewhat of a brick wall, this lasted for at least three days, three days where I found myself staring blankly at the computer screen with nothing to say. After doing more research and reading it became apparent to me that I needed to stop trying to be so academic and I just needed to be as honest and truthful as I could be. As soon as I adapted to this frame of mind I found myself typing constantly, with a lot to say. Not only this but I discovered myself saying and discussing certain people in my life, memories and events which were extremely personal to me, which I would never discuss, even with the people closest to me. When I wrote this element I had a feeling of release and ease, ultimately it actually made me feel good to get these feelings off my chest. Therefore writing a journal or diary is something I have started to do since this project and something I will continue to do as I find this an amazing way to discuss my own feelings without having to actually talk about them with someone else. After completing element 1, element 2 seemed a lot easier and with the advice from Paul, again honesty seemed to be the best policy. By being honest and frank about the truth of not really knowing what on earth my 'me' was made completing this element easy, interesting and fun. I actually found myself enjoying the concept of having a conversation with myself about my experiences as this made me question and really think about the different experiences I have had and question how they have shaped me as a person and a professional. At the end of the process I began to really understand how I could be seen as a research professional (Participant E).*

Creating space through reading aids the reflexive approach and the building of the lens;

*After reading a substantial amount of literature I was able to gain an understanding of my expectations and use of reflective writing. The use of the JOHARI window was very insightful. It was the first time using this tool and it helped me really focus on the different behaviours. By incorporating these behaviours against personality and emotional intelligence tests I was forced to actually think in depth about the roots of these behaviours and why I truly behave the way I do (Participant C)*

To engage in reflexive method of research there needs to be a methodical approach to the design of the reflexive digital bricolage as recognised by;

*Whilst I don't suggest I will throw caution and impartiality to the wind, I feel that the recognition that we bring some of who we are into everything we do - that our experiences, values, spirituality and learned behaviours impact how we perceive, think, feel and act – gives me a sense of relief that this has been acknowledged. I feel somehow free in that knowledge, that I have permission to be me! On a personal level, I tortured myself over a previous incident at work and now I feel I have been able to move on in a more positive way, having learned from the experience through intense critical reflection for this project (Participant D)*

## **Recognition of the Value of Alternative Approaches**

The traditional approaches to reflective practice do not take into account the potential of research and how bricolage of multiple methodologies can increase reflexivity and create reflexive space for making sense of professional identity.

*'The emotions I felt through the process was equal to that of a swing; up and down, sometimes I was soaring and enjoying the process and feeling liberated.... others I was shrieking 'help, too much!' Using different methodologies was interesting too. To branch out and be that more creative, that more independent was definitely a struggle, but when doing so, was liberating. I didn't really know how I felt about my past or myself, and I certainly didn't understand until this PGBM86' (Participant A)*

This research process does challenge the learner to position themselves and the use of alternative approaches to reflection in the form of reflexive digital bricolage can act as a pathway to this enlightenment.

*Not all of the answers to those questions made it into the assignment but in forcing me to confront some home truths I have gained more insight into my professional behaviour and what I still need to work on. Halfway through completing my assignment I received my bi-annual performance review at work and I was able to view it more constructively than I had previously. Completing this project enabled me to view my professional role from a different viewpoint and appreciate the progression I have made over the years (Participant B).*

Further supported by;

*This process made me feel naked because it stripped me to the foundations. While I did my assignment I felt I was dissecting myself through deep thoughts and analysis of incidences made me question my motives, behaviours and feelings towards these incidences. (Participant C)*

The use of personal cultural texts (Findlay, 2005; 2013) as personal data (Armstrong, 2015) is a different form of qualitative research beyond the traditions of interviews and focus groups;

*This included undertaking a number of personality tests which afforded me greater insight into my fundamental character traits – the good, the bad and the ugly – and I was able to identify the inherent weakness when these are out of balance. This has given me a greater understanding of myself and I feel I will be a much better professional (and person) in future because of this enhanced self-awareness. The format of the project was also different and I sometimes struggled with the non-conventional aspects of it; from trying to use a creative approach (not my natural inclination) to uploading everything on Mahara (as a technophobe this was frustrating) but again, it challenged me to do something different and even using an alternative medium is a positive learning experience. As a teacher, we often refer to a ‘teachers toolkit’ and I feel that this module has provided me with a ‘kit-bag’ of tools and resources I can draw on; I know I will use frameworks such as Gibbs or Gardner to enable me to carry out more structured and meaningful reflection in future and I also have new ideas related to collaborative reflection. I will continue to read about and practice auto-ethnographic writing and plan to introduce my colleagues, friends and students to it. I feel that this project, more than anything else on the course, catapulted me firmly out of my comfort zone; it made me really look at myself as a person, professional and researcher and dared me to do so critically, but without fear of judgement or reprisal. Both Paul as Lecturer and Helen as Project Supervisor, were fully supportive in their encouragement of me to really embrace this reflective project and pushed me to discover my identity as an emerging researcher (Participant D).*

This research process challenged the learner around their ideas around the meanings of being and acting 'academic' due to traditional conventions around research design and reflective practice;

*Surprisingly, the elements which I thought would be much easier for me (the introduction and critique) as they were the most academic and easy to understand, I actually found these the most difficult to complete. I had a lot of trouble understanding the different methodologies and what they consisted of. Therefore this required me to do a lot of reading probably more than double the amount that I had expected to do, which was very time consuming, along with a lot of confirmation from Paul that I was on the right track. Overall, I did find this project to be very difficult. This was mainly because it was unlike anything I had ever done before and a lot of the academic readings were things that I had never even heard of, never mind actually used before. The creativity of the project was a real struggle for myself as well as I do not consider myself to be creative in the slightest! So I simply had to do it in the most simplest way, of which was easiest my myself, but looking back I feel that although I don't consider myself creative, some of my work did have a good creative side to it (Participant E).*

As this research matured and the learners started to consider and make sense of alternative approaches to reflection and entered into a reflexive space they were starting to build their own lens which would lead to personal transformation.

## **Personal Transformation**

Personal transformation and reflexivity are a struggle and the learners recognised how the building of their reflexive digital bricolage was the start of this personal transformation as they enter their professional lives as researching professionals (Armstrong and Bryans, 2016);

*'I didn't know how I wanted to be professionally and certainly didn't understand expect to feel ready for the world after completing this unit. Knowing who I am, where I stand and what I'm made of. It's been a war of words. A battle between me, my past and me. But I'm glad I did it. This potato-headed portrait could one day be a Picasso'* (Participant A).

This is supported by;

*'Previously I would have said I hadn't changed at all throughout my years in the role. Being able to write creatively made this project easier for me as it allowed me to draw on my skills from my undergraduate degree. Although it was my personal story, writing in the style of creative non-fiction allowed me to put enough distance between myself and the writing to allow me to analyse my feelings accurately and also include details which I may not have felt comfortable including had it simply been a diagnostic piece'* (Participant B).

The recognition of how reflexive digital bricolage has started a process of transformation for increasing self-awareness;

*'By doing this assignment I stopped to think of the emotions and feelings behind my actions and realised that I often do or carry on with minimum attachment. Doing this reflective assignment brought this to my awareness'* (Participant C).

The potential therapeutic nature of reflexivity and auto ethnography is widely accepted by scholars including Ellis (2005); Pelias (2013) and Barleet (2013);

*I feel like I have been through a form of self-help/therapy it has been so intense at times; but the outcome, for me, has been transformative. I think with all things, you get out what you put in, and I fully embraced this project as an opportunity to find out more about qualitative research and myself, and on both counts, it has been an illuminating and fulfilling learning experience. Thank you! (Participant D).*

Transformation can also be in the form of recognition of different approaches which have disrupted your learning style and environment;

*Even though I did find this to be extremely difficult and confusing at times, I do think this piece of work has been the most interesting and rewarding assessment that I have ever done in my whole time at university. I believe if done whole-heartedly by being open and honest with yourself, it gives you a huge insight into yourself both personally and professionally. I also believe this research is very useful for you as you move forward in your life and career (Participant E).*

From the collaborative autoethnographic conversations the building of the reflexive digital bricolage lens is different for each individual even though there are some common themes based around anxiety and confusion of this approach as it is new and different. The evidence also suggests the co-creation of understanding is through a dynamic of learner and supervisor interaction as well as immersing in the literature which draws from a multi methodological research design (the bricolage). Once the learners have positioned themselves within this approach they start to build their own lens of reflexive digital bricolage which starts them on the journey towards personal transformation.



## **6.0 Conclusions and Further Research**

This paper starts a conversation and debate around the potential of reflexive digital bricolage as a method for developing ethical and values focussed HR Professionals (Davies, 2017). The collaborative autoethnographic conversations with a group of recently qualified HR Professionals who undertook a Human Resource Reflective Project as the final stage of their Masters programme has presented some insights into the potential for reflexive digital bricolage (Armstrong, 2018).

The autobiographical reflexivity involved as research design does take into account the potential for professional development to go beyond the need for learning logs (Holden and Griggs, 2011) towards professional development being a co-creation of understanding of professional identity using poetics as artful embodiment of identity identification, development and transformation (Armstrong, 2015; Barleet, 2013; Findley, 2005; 2013) as art brings the subconscious to the conscious (Vallack, 2017).

Digital reflection as proposed by Kirk and Pitches (2013) is a method of patchworks which were proposed by Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska (1999) as they presented the art of professional development.

This conceptualization of art based research methodologies, digital reflection and professional identity as reflexive digital bricolage is proposed as an alternative approach to professional development.

Further research with participants after graduation and in their early professional career roles could lead to the continuation of the building of this lens.

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