

An Autoethnographical Design: Using Autoethnographic Methods to Understand and Portray Experience through Design

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I briefly describe autoethnography as a practice which enables the researcher to act both as researcher and participant constructing an understanding of a social context and culture that focuses as much on what is felt, heard, and experienced, as on what is seen. I propose to use autoethnographic methods, and in particular interactive interviewing, to explore the holistic experiences of members of the Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing project to examine the workshop theme of autonomy. I suggest that the use of autoethnographic techniques may enable a deeper and richer engagement between members of the volunteer group and researcher fostering collaboration over design. In addition, I suggest that an autoethnographic design that exposes the rich emotional experiences entailed in growing and sharing produce may support the development of stronger relationships between volunteers, as well as encourage new members to the community.

Author Keywords

Autoethnography, autonomy, design methodology, emotional experiences, Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing project.

INTRODUCTION

This short proposal outlines a design methodology intended to richly understand, engage and design for the affective experiences of a group of grassroots activists working in Vancouver. Specifically, I seek to use my personal experiences of growing and sharing vegetables with family and friends in the UK to better understand and explore the experiences of those contributing to the Richmond Fruit

Tree Sharing project. In doing so, I hope to focus on the workshop theme of autonomy. For example, can autoethnographical methods be used to engage richly and deeply with those volunteering at the Richmond Fruit Tree project encouraging better collaboration? By sharing my personal stories, experiences and emotions of vegetable growing and sharing, can I quickly build rapport and trust with the group? Finally, can a resulting autoethnographic interaction design that explicitly evokes our experiences of vegetable growing and sharing contribute to a strengthening of group solidarity and even help to recruit new members?

In this short proposal, I will provide a brief overview of autoethnography alongside considerations as to how autoethnography has been used within HCI to date. Following this, I provide an example of an autoethnographical method that may be appropriate for use within the HCI, Politics and the City workshop. In the final section of this paper I provide an initial draft narrative of one of my own personal experiences of growing vegetables as a start-point for working with the Richmond Tree Sharing project.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is a form of ethnography that uses the self as a lens to understand a wider culture and in turn uses the experiences of others to better understand the self. The increased use of autoethnography as a method for understanding others and the self is reflective of a shift in social sciences to focus further on emotion, as well as an increasing questioning of the generalizability, and objectivity of knowledge. Autoethnography can be approached from a number of angles. For example, some researchers produce narrative autoethnographies that blend fiction and real life (4) thereby crossing the boundary between art and science. Other researchers produce analytical autoethnography that is more compatible with traditional ethnographic practices and epistemological assumptions (1). Anderson (1) considers that the key features of an autoethnography are 1) complete member status of a researcher, 2) analytic reflexivity, 3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, 4) dialogue with

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informants beyond the self, and 5) commitment to theoretical analysis. In contrast, Ellis (4), in describing the features of an autoethnography, focuses more on describing the product of an autoethnography. For example, Ellis posits that the resulting autoethnography should be 1) a narrative written in the first person, 2) a generalization within a single case extended over time, 3) presented as a story with a narrative, characterisation, and plot line. Whilst, Ellis highlights the features of a text, she also discusses the autoethnographical product as a staged performance, or for example, as an artwork.

Artwork in particular is considered an approach to autoethnography that “evokes response from others, inspires imagination, gives pause for new possibilities and meanings, and opens new questions and avenues of inquiry” (4, pp.215). Through participation at the HCI, Politics and the City workshop and collaboration with the Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing project I seek to begin an exploration as to whether autoethnography can also be articulated through the design and implementation of digital media and technology. If successful, a design approach and resulting technology which focuses on the personal, and emotional experience evoked through working the land, growing vegetables, and giving away the rewards of hard labour may support the group in understanding the different motivations of members working for the project. An autoethnographic design may also make the experiences of the group more directly accessible and engaging to the outside world, potentially encouraging new members to involve themselves in the project.

Autoethnography as a design technique is relatively new to HCI. Cunningham et al. (2) discuss autoethnography as an “ethnography-lite” enabling student researchers to complete research on themselves as individuals to understand their own behaviours, and working contexts in order to complete design and development work. Crucially, autoethnographic research as discussed by Cunningham et al. results in a set of requirements for an interface, or interaction, rather than the expression of a narrative where the relationships, and emotion experienced play central stage. Duncan (3) describes her use of autoethnographic methods to influence the design of three hypermedia programs, and her own practice of hypermedia design. Similarly, the resulting autoethnography became a set of design requirements for hypermedia learning environments.

PROPOSED PROJECT

There will be limited time during the HCI, Politics and the City workshop to truly complete autoethnographic work with the Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing project. Whilst, in one sense I hold member status as I myself am a vegetable gardener, I recognise that there are significant differences between the context where I grow vegetables, and context in which members of the Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing project work. Perhaps most significantly, the vegetables I grow, whilst shared, are shared with individuals with whom

I have a personal relationship, rather than with members of my local community in need of food.

Yet, it may be fruitful to try autoethnographic methods as a starting point for both exploring the experiences of the volunteers, whilst also examining the feasibility of using autoethnographic techniques in HCI design practice. For instance, it may be interesting to use interactive interviewing techniques (Ellis 2004) to explore, in a collaborative manner, experiences related to vegetable growing and sharing. Using this technique all involved act as both researcher, and research participant collaboratively sharing their own personal stories, as well as using these stories and experiences to understand and contribute to the stories and experiences of others. Interactive interviewing depends on breaking the cycle of traditional preconceptions around interviewing, i.e. that the researcher as an authority figure asks a question, the interviewee answers the question, and then waits for the interviewer to ask their next question. Instead, interactive interviewing relies on all participants engaging in a conversation, sharing personal stories, experiences and feelings. One proposed technique to overcome this traditional cycle is for the researcher to start a session by sharing their own personal story first. Thereby, hopefully stimulating the participants to tell their own stories. What follows is one possible personal story that I could use to start an interactive interviewing session with members of the Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing project.

THE PARSNIP BATTLE AND BREAKTHROUGH

The ground is hard and icy. I place the weight of my body on the spade my body knowing that I need to get on with the many jobs needed doing on the allotment if I’m going to stay on top of things this year, not matter how cold it is. I am not thinking about the allotment, instead I am thinking about how cold my feet and hands are. I wish that I could fit regular gloves underneath my gardening gloves, maybe I should buy bigger gardening gloves for the winter, or perhaps somewhere sells thermal gardening gloves... Maybe I should pop to the gardening shop to see if they have any better gloves. Anything to not have to dig this soil right now. But, part of me tells me to keep going, knowing my plot is always in a state compared to the other plots around me, that I must put the time and work in if I want to have a productive gardening year. I begin to concentrate more on where I am. From here I can see all of Brighton, the beautiful crescent shapes that the houses make, the grey of the sea, and behind all of this, the hills of the South Downs. I am lucky to have this space. I continue digging. My body slowly becomes warm, but somehow the warmth never reaches my freezing fingers and toes. I tell myself I am a robot. I try to mechanically alternate between pressing my foot and body weight onto the spade, piercing through the hard ground, and using the strength of my back and arms to lift the spade to move several inches of soil into a wheelbarrow to my right. The wheelbarrow becomes fuller, and more and more unsteady. It threatens to tip all the hard-dug soil back into the trench that I am digging, and I

wonder how much easier it must be to garden somewhere that is flat. And with that thought I am no longer a gardening robot. I begin to wonder whether I have dug enough, surely it is time to add manure into this trench. I spy the tell-tale yellowy white of chalk at the bottom of the trench. I have finally dug deep enough. I use my gloved hands to open a bag of manure. I love the smell. I recollect the holiday where a new-born calf was named after me by the farmer, and the early mornings that I got up to help on the farm before any of my family members had awoken. At the same time, I shake clumps of manure out of the bag and into the trench, twisting a garden fork at the base of the trench to mix the manure into the light soil.

In the five years that I have had the allotment I have never managed to grow parsnips from seed. Sometimes the papery seeds refuse to grow. The wet winters and springs so common in Brighton gradually rot away the seeds that I have carefully sown. Sometimes one or two of the many seeds that I have planted to turn to seedlings, but have always disappeared before maturing into a parsnip. I suspect these seedlings have been enjoyed by one of the many slugs that live on my plot, and with whom I wage a beer and yeast war every summer. As I survey the allotment and the freshly dug and fertilised bed where I intend to plant this year's parsnips seeds my eye is drawn to a bag of top soil sitting at the side of the pond. I decide to experiment. This year I plant all my parsnip seeds in a layer of topsoil. Perhaps they will have more chance in a fine and light soil, rather than in the chalky and stony soil of the allotment.

Over the coming months I spend my time on the allotment preparing the remaining beds for the planting season ahead. Every now and then I take a break from digging and go over to the parsnip bed to see how my parsnip experiment is coming along. For many weeks nothing happens, parsnips are notoriously slow at germinating. One sunny Saturday, to my delight, I see a neat row of bright green shoots pushing up through the topsoil, their small trefoil shape leaf unfurling in the sunlight. I smile, but looking at how tightly packed the seedlings are, I know that I must thin them out to give the strongest looking seedlings the room to grow big. I feel terrible pulling the tiny, fragile seedlings out of the ground, sacrificing them for the bigger seedlings that neighboured them. I tell myself they are only plants, they don't feel, but I continue to feel the tension of having nurtured and wished for the seeds to germinate to now be pulling them from the ground and throwing them into the compost.

The spring, summer and autumn months pass. My 20 parsnips continue to grow, their beige bodies growing deep into the soil. It is a mystery what they look like below the soil, and I assess their health by the large green leafy foliage sprouting over the soil. The dry brown spots on the leaves cause me to worry and I browse the Internet on my smart phone in such of the cause. It feels strange to be able to look at the Internet whilst on my allotment, but there is

no one around to ask, and besides I don't know anyone well enough to want to interrupt their work. I find nothing helpful, but I worry it might be contagious and pinch off the infected leaves in the hope that the crop will not be spoiled. I must now just be patient, I resist the urge to dig around the parsnips to examine their roots, and the urge to pull up a parsnip.

The winter has been unusually cold and bitter with much of the UK coming to a standstill for several days under the snow and ice. People complain, the airports are shut, roads are closed, and it's hard to get to work, or do the shopping, but at the back of my mind I'm thinking how good this weather will be for the allotment: the trees are better able to become dormant; the slugs are less likely to survive; and the frost will help make my parsnips sweet.

It is January, and the allotment is deserted except for my husband, our friends, and me. I am showing off my allotment, getting ready to cook a Sunday lunch, and hoping to be able to forage some vegetables from the allotment to go with the chicken we bought the day before. I take a hand trowel and head towards my parsnips. The parsnip foliage has completely died back, except for small set of pale green shoots at the crown of each parsnip. I take my hand trowel, and dig around the parsnip crown. The soil is wet and cold, and the parsnip roots run deep, I tug at a parsnip but it does not want to come loose from the soil. I put down the trowel and dig further down with my bare hands, carefully avoiding scratching or damaging the parsnip root. Again, I tug at the parsnip, gently twisting, and wagging the parsnip in the soil. Eventually, I hear a light snap, and I pull gently at the parsnip. Finally, it comes free, a beautifully straight parsnip, tapering perfectly from a thick crown down to a delicate thin root. It must be at least 30 cm long. I show the parsnip to my husband and our friends. Excitedly, I say: "This is the first parsnip I have managed to grow from seed! Isn't it the most perfect looking parsnip you have seen?" They smile obligingly, "Oh, yeah? That's brilliant, come on though, get the other ones out and we'll get dinner on."

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