In this paper, we propose that autoethnographic research methods can inform teaching and learning in university classrooms. We illustrate how this research method might be used for pedagogical purposes by describing how we taught from our own stories of caring for our mothers during the final years of their lives. We conclude by outlining some of the payoffs and the pitfalls of using autoethnographical approaches in the university classroom.

Autoethnography is becoming an accepted qualitative research method. The term “autoethnography” was first used by Karl Heider in 1975, but it is thanks to the pioneering work of Carolyn Ellis (1999, 2004), that the promise of this research method for exploring and communicating culture is becoming recognized in the social sciences. In 2005 Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner described the method in a pre-conference workshop at the First International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry held at the University of Illinois. Interestingly, this workshop was over-subscribed, which raises the question, What is this method and why is it becoming so popular?

Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as “part auto or self and part ethno or culture” (2004, p. 31). In other words, it is a method of communicating a culture to people who are unfamiliar with this culture. She emphasizes that both the ethnographic process and what is produced from the process are important.

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: first they look through an autoethnographic wide angle lens, focusing on social and cultural
aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward. exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond recognition. (pp. 37-38)

Autoethnography is based on stories, and stories are constructs that allow people to make sense of their worlds and their lives, she states. Stories are essential to human understanding, she proposes. “Stories are the focus of Homeric literature, oral traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales” (p. 32). Quick to acknowledge that stories are not unique to autoethnography, their importance to herself and her research are emphasized, “I love to tell and write stories. It is in my soul” (p. 32).

Carolyn Ellis distinguishes between the private personal story that might be contained in a private journal or stored in a file cabinet to be shared with a special few (if any), and the story that should be made public. She argues that some stories insist on being told. Reflecting on her own stories, she states that some of the most profound and unsettling experiences of her life assisted her to gain more understanding about sociological concepts as well as more understanding about herself. “Something spiritual, emotional or from my ‘gut’ compelled me to write down what had happened, and the form this writing took was stories... I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself” (p. 33).

Sometimes the stories of more than one person combine in an autoethnography. In “The Autoethnographic I”, Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis write about “How we Met” (pp. 54-57). Also, Carolyn Ellis writes about her children as her children and also as her “co-collaborators in writing about interactive interviewing” (p. 57). Other couples also write about their relationships. For example, Laurel Richardson and Ernest Lockridge, in “Travels with Ernest”, describe how their relationship developed during their world-travels (2004).
Autoethnography in the Classroom

Rosemary became a social work educator in Canada after more than two decades of practice as a social worker in England. During the first few busy months as a social work educator, Rosemary tried to update herself on developments in social work theory that had occurred since she qualified in the 1970s. But it was the stories she told that students identified as most memorable – stories about her work with families and communities. As she became more confident about her work, the story of how she herself felt when she removed a child from abusive parents, or the story about how she helped teenage girls to escape from a burning building and then told parents that their daughter had died in the blaze. As the years passed, Rosemary became bored with her own stories of practice and began to draw upon her personal life in her teaching. During her classes she spoke about the dilemmas that she faced as a mother of teenagers or her experiences as a daughter of a woman who was reaching the end of her life. Like Kim Zapf (1997), she realized that teaching from her own story rather than from second-hand narration of other’s stories was most effective in assisting students to learn about social work. Vignettes that had previously been briefly mentioned to illustrate ideas, were explored more fully. She encouraged students to tell their own stories. Students and teacher felt that the curriculum was enriched. At this time, narrative was gaining prominence in academic research and teaching, so when Rosemary learned about narrative research, particularly autoethnographic research, she was excited at the opportunity to develop more teaching techniques and ideas about how autoethnography could be a valuable pedagogic tool.

Dolores had grown up in Newfoundland where story-telling was a rich part of the heritage. As a child she read autobiographies and loved learning about prominent individuals from history, arts, current events, and different cultures. Without realizing it at the time, her childhood culture and interests had shaped a later career direction using autobiographical inquiry in teaching nursing. From the beginning of her teaching career Dolores had developed a focus on curriculum development and until her doctoral studies had been on a quest to understand how to create curriculums in nursing using the personal knowledge of practitioner’s and educator’s experiences. In her doctoral work, she studied with Dr. Michael Connelly, a pioneer in narrative inquiry, and felt like she had
come “home” in many ways. Narrative inquiry, and in particular autobiographical inquiry, Dolores learned, provided means to understand and express the tacit knowledge from human experience that shaped professional practices (i.e., curriculum). Since her doctoral studies, she has taught autobiographical inquiry to nursing students in an attempt to guide them in understanding the curriculum they live and practice by. During this time, Dolores’ mother, who is a senior in age but young at heart and spirit, came from Newfoundland to keep her daughter company. Over the years, Dolores has learned the richness of aging through this experience, and has come to understand from discussions with Rosemary, the role autoethnography plays for seniors reliving and retelling their stories. In particular, the shifts in time and place, the zooming in and out, the blurring of distinctions among memories, and the emerging of the vulnerable self that occur in stories sift into the present, reveal a hidden curriculum of aging that is often dismissed rather than examined.

A Personal and Professional Relationship and Autoethnography in a Social Work and Aging Course

In the fall of 2006, Rosemary was pleased when she was assigned to teach an undergraduate course in Social Work and Aging. Having taught the course on a previous occasion it provided an opportunity for her to reflect on her own aging processes. During the previous course she had told stories about her relationship with her mother and with professional helpers. Encouraged by the work of Ellis/Bochner and Richardson/Lockridge, Rosemary invited her friend and colleague Dolores to join one of her classes. Both had been conducting qualitative research together, had organized conferences together, and were personal friends. Since they had talked often about their experiences of caring for their mothers in their own homes, they decided to share some of these significant stories about family caring in this social work course.

In the course session Rosemary had devoted to “family caring for older adults”, Dolores joined the discussion. As the session began, Rosemary invited students to share their experiences (if any) of family caring. This small class of 12 students had worked together for several weeks and generally knew each other well from several courses taken together previously. While Rosemary values
narrative work in the classroom, she is cautious with the methodology at the same time, believing that students should be encouraged to tell stories but never coerced, that they should choose whether to talk about personal experiences or not. Via the use of a “circle round”, choice was provided. Each student in turn was free to tell the group if they had experienced family care. They could disclose, or “pass”, or answer “no” to sharing their personal experiences to classmates, instructor and guest, Rosemary advised. Unexpectedly, all students participated, with about half describing relevant experiences, and with almost all of these with family care of a grandmother.

The class and professors then watched a short Canadian film (National Film Board, 1998) which featured five family caregivers who spoke about their experiences of caring for an aging family member. Several different issues were alluded to and several different family situations were portrayed. Dependent adults were of different ages and had different degrees of physical and mental challenge. The carers and the dependent adults were of both genders, they lived in different parts of the Canada, and the film suggested that the families had different income levels. In one narrative a son spoke about the stress he experienced when he attempted to communicate with his mother. An older woman expressed her sadness that her physical strength restricted her ability to tend to the physical needs of her husband and her fears for the future when his needs would increase and her strength would decline further. Many students thought that the film very moving, to the point that a box of tissues was passed from one student to another who was weeping. Following the film, Rosemary and Dolores held a “fishbowl” discussion about their personal experiences with family caregiving in front of the class, and invited students to contribute their insights afterward.

Beginning with a discussion of their mothers’ needs and strategies they had developed to meet those needs in ways that were akin to their mothers’ life stories, Rosemary and Dolores covered health problems, services, challenges, social needs, and surprises that arose from their caring. Both mothers had been frail with chronic health problems, and in accessing needed health services, a series of challenges arose as a result of cuts to these services. Challenges had also arisen in providing ways to meet their mothers’ social needs, in particular arranging access to day-care or community lunches. Spiritual needs, though
often important, became significant when Rosemary’s mother was near death and needed to meet with a spiritual advisor so that she died in peace. Finally, Rosemary and Dolores shared stories about their mothers’ emotional needs, particularly fear and anxiety when the women had experiences they could not understand.

Focusing on themselves as family carers, Rosemary and Dolores recalled their challenges in addressing their own needs. Combining university teaching and home care for a frail mother left little time for self-care. Disturbed sleep, constant fatigue, and stress resulted from anxiety about the unexpected - such as an acute illness of mother or daughter or a difficulty in finding a home care worker to cover during their work schedules. While both daughters tried to support each other by “stealing” time for occasional lunches, they also shared “mother” stories and prompted one another with humourous stories from their situations. For Rosemary, the contrast between her life before and after the death of her mother brought much reflection.

Following their personal stories of family caregiving, Rosemary and Dolores invited students to raise questions or contribute from their personal experiences. A rich, frank, and insightful discussion ensued in which students drew from the film, from Rosemary and Dolores’ discussion, and from their colleagues’ experiences. A broad terrain was covered that revealed a wealth of knowledge and experiential wisdom from students’ and teachers’ lives and from the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. Such skills as communicating with people who have sensory impairments to burnout experienced by carers, from strategies to promote anti-oppressive practice and senior abuse (for family carers as well as for older adults) to social policies needed for the rapidly growing aging population in New Brunswick, from the strengths and limitations of gerontological social work theory to the challenges that arose during interprofessional communications. While the focus of family caregiving ended with this class, for the remainder of the term students drew upon these discussions to highlight other topics and referred to it in their written assignments.
Payoffs and Pitfalls of Autoethnography in the University Classroom

This classroom experiment in autoethnography was largely successful. Students identified that the emotion evident in our voices gave permission to them to empathize with our experiences. These stories, like all stories, engaged the students’ interest more than the dry “case studies” drawn from professional textbooks. In realizing the importance of these stories to their professors’ lives, students came to realize the importance of stories in their own lives. They came to realize that stories go beyond a narration of events; they carry with them a glimpse of the human condition and a sense of the other as a person rather than a stranger. Like Carolyn Ellis, we endeavoured to share the culture of ourselves, in our instance as family carers. And in so doing, created a new culture within the classroom – a culture of legitimacy for sharing stories of family caregiving. This method revealed a hidden knowledge base that might not have been tapped otherwise, and a culture of examining the everyday theories family members develop when facing the challenges elder care presents. Students and faculty left the classroom that day with a collection of stories from the film, the fish-bowl discussion, and the session where students openly expressed their stories. This culture went on as a living curriculum in so many other forums – it continued to emerge in other classes during the term, and it was shared by Rosemary and Dolores at the Atlantic Teaching Showcase where several other professors also talked about their caregiving experiences. Autoethnography has a way of regenerating itself; once the process begins it goes on indefinitely, expanding its reach into many different forums and lives. Stories told in class are often memorable and timeless. Students report that sometimes they remember a story long after it has been told, and find that they retell it in new situations, but when recalled the story often brings new meaning at a new time in their lives.

Narrative methods including autoethnographic teaching and learning, we recognize, are not a panacea for all situations; they have their limitations. When we try to tell a difficult experience too close to the event, the emotion may still be quite “raw” and the narration of it may be too painful. For teachers, telling our personal stories in the classroom can leave us open to criticisms from others (and to self-criticism) about how we lead our lives (Ellis, 2004, p. 34). There are pitfalls for students too. As educators, we can never know the depth of meaning in aspects of our students’ lives. Since autoethnography is an emotional method,
we might unintentionally open up painful wounds that students are not ready to deal with. However conscientiously and carefully instructors try to reassure students that it is acceptable to tell stories, and equally acceptable to remain silent, students may fall victim to internal pressure or external peer-pressure to speak. Yet, once the story is told, they might regret having exposed themselves to public awareness. At times students get caught up in the story as passive consumers and do not move beyond the story to analyze its meaning or implications. In this case, they can get frozen in a story that limits the growth of self-knowledge and awareness. Finally, in a valuable encounter with participants at this Teaching Showcase, in a different presentation from the caregiving one, we were reminded that storytelling and story-listening may have cultural limitations and not be acceptable in all cultures.

As educators of students who plan to enter health or human service occupations, this experience affirmed for us the power and the benefit of real-life stories in the education of our students. Discussions after our presentation at the Teaching Showcase showed the value of this method in the social sciences too. Narrative methods, such as autoethnography, are not a panacea but they are very valuable. We intend to continue to use these methods in our teaching as well as in our research, and to examine their benefits and limitations in different situations and with different groups.

References


