The Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research

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Pedagogies, positionality and power

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/b23046-1
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Published online on: 10 Nov 2022

How to cite :- Emilio A. Anteliz, Deborah L. Mulligan, Patrick Alan Danaher. 10 Nov 2022,
Pedagogies, positionality and power from: The Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research Routledge
Accessed on: 15 Aug 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/b23046-1

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PEDAGOGIES, POSITIONALITY AND POWER

Maximising the mutual meanings of autoethnography and educational research

Emilio A. Anteliz, Deborah L. Mulligan and Patrick Alan Danaher

Introduction

The Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research is focused on the complex and diverse connections between autoethnography and contemporary educational research. More specifically, it is centred on exploring the multiple ways in which autoethnography, as a distinctive and rigorous research method, contributes to enlarging, enriching and extending the assumptions and concerns of educational research. It is directed also at investigating particular means by which autoethnography in turn is interrogated, challenged and developed through its applications to educational research projects.

In introducing this handbook, this chapter brings together, and places in a wider perspective, two central propositions. The first proposition underpinning the chapter is that the burgeoning scholarly publications about autoethnography, including the subsequent chapters, encapsulate distilled insights into existence and experience that generate crucial understandings of current and potential educational policy-making and provision with varying degrees of explicitness and formality (see, for example, Adams et al., 2022a; Burrows, 2018; Harrison, 2009; Rook, 2019; Wong, 2008). Autoethnography opens windows into the aspirations, assumptions and outcomes of individuals and groups involved in learning, teaching, leading educational sites and systems, framing curricula, assessing learning and teaching, and evaluating the impacts of educational programs and courses. Autoethnography also yields greater awareness of the fundamental relationship between “self” and “other/s”, including how that relationship is constructed and mediated in the context of formal, non-formal and informal learning, and how that relationship can help to facilitate, and/or to impede, educationally oriented goals such as the formation of informed citizens and the growth of peaceful communities. In doing so, autoethnography invites and enables focused attention on the informal, personal and private dimensions of the otherwise formalised and official discourses attending curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

The second central proposition animating this chapter is that rigorous educational research, also synthesised in the subsequent chapters, constitutes a framework for reflecting critically on
the limits and limitations of autoethnography, and where appropriate and possible for assisting in extending the influence and reach of autoethnography. Like any well-established research method, autoethnography is at potential risk of rigidification and stultification if it is not constantly reviewed and renewed, and the concerns and issues of educational research form a fertile ground for feeding back to, and for continuing to enlarge and enrich the applications and implications of, current and future autoethnographic research (see, for example, Hannan, 2016; Ingman, 2016; Kappert, 2020; Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

In introducing the Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research, this chapter is divided into the following three sections:

• A rationale for the handbook
• Organising principles for the handbook
• The content and structure of the handbook.

A rationale for the handbook

In composing this introductory chapter, we have taken care not to repeat material that is readily available from other autoethnographic researchers, but instead to highlight the identified distinctiveness of this handbook that is intended to contribute to that broader corpus of work. As a starting point, we note Denshire’s (2014) contention that “… auto-ethnography is a relatively young and contested field” (p. 832), and relatedly we endorse Poulos’s (2021) widely ranging depiction of autoethnography that signifies some of its complexity and diversity:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues.

(italics in the original)

Moreover, we acknowledge wholeheartedly the initiation and early development of this scholarly field, as well as the continuing contributions to its lively continuation and further thinking, led by the foundational figures of Tony Adams, Art Bochner, Carolyn Ellis and Stacy Holman Jones, among others. We note also the most recent definition of autoethnography distilled by three of these figures: “‘Autoethnography’ consists of three characteristics or activities: the ‘auto,’ or self; the ‘ethno,’ or culture; and the ‘graphy,’ or representation/writing/story. Projects defined as ‘autoethnography’ engage all three characteristics” (Adams et al., 2022b; italics in the original). Additionally, we endorse these same prominent autoethnographers’ equally recent encapsulation of five of the most important functions fulfilled by high-quality autoethnography, which in turn synthesise many of the central claims for the continuing relevance of such research:

(1) foreground particular and subjective knowledge;
(2) illustrate sensemaking processes;
(3) make contributions to existing research;
(4) challenge norms of research practice and representation; and
(5) engage and compel responses from audiences.

(Adams et al., 2022b)
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Furthermore, we read with great interest these same three renowned autoethnographers’ synthesis of current issues and potential tensions in continuing to progress autoethnography as a productive and vibrant research field:

- Creating, Sustaining, and Loving Community
- Evaluating, Refining, and Doing Autoethnography Unapologetically

(Adams et al., 2022b)

Consistent with our approach articulated above, we acknowledge but do not replicate here important discussions in the autoethnographic literature. These discussions traverse the historical development of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011), the particular ethical implications of conducting autoethnography (Boyln, 2017; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010), the interplay between individual and collaborative forms of autoethnography (Chang, 2013), the epistemological dimension of autoethnography (Smith, 2005), autoethnography as feminist method (Ettorre, 2017) and the novel insights that autoethnography facilitates into the home–away nexus (Alsop, 2002). Moreover, these accounts illustrate the highly diverse range of disciplines to which autoethnography continues to contribute powerfully and significantly, including chaplaincy studies (Kestenbaum et al., 2015), librarianship and information science (Fourie, 2021), organisational studies (Herrmann, 2020), psychology and coaching (Clegg & Law, 2017), sport and physical culture (Allen-Collinson, 2012) and vocational psychology (McIlveen et al., 2010). Additionally, equally diverse techniques have been employed to maximise the distinctive affordances of autoethnography, among them critical collaborative or co-autoethnography (Park & Wilmes, 2019), exo-autoethnography (Denejkina, 2017), multivocality (Choi, 2017; Mizzi, 2010), the interplay between autoethnography and narrative inquiry (Adams et al., 2021), performance autoethnography (Denzin, 2018), varied approaches to reading autoethnography (Salvo, 2020), the often-creative and innovative strategies for writing autoethnography, such as facilitating transgressive accounts of professional practice (Denshire, 2014), and the complex relationship between autoethnography and decolonisation (Dutta, 2018).

Against this backdrop of the very extensive and rapidly growing scholarly literature both applying and evaluating autoethnography in highly diverse disciplines, this handbook is situated at the confluence of two clearly defined scholarly fields: autoethnography and educational research. We have traced a few of the many contours of the autoethnographic field above. We lack the space to do likewise for educational research. Suffice to remark that much educational research is concerned with the formal, official and public dimensions of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – the prescribed courses of study, the sanctioned teaching strategies, the approved and moderated techniques for evaluating students’ learning, and the system-level ‘big data’ and ‘leagues tables’ for comparing results among students, schools, school systems and nations. This research generates valuable findings about the forms and functions of contemporary educational policy-making and provision.

At the same time, autoethnography can and does afford crucial insights into that policy-making and provision from very different perspectives: of learners and their families and communities, educators and their school and system leaders, government officials, and businesses and other stakeholders in and recipients of the short- and longer-term effects of learning and teaching of diverse kinds. These perspectives enable evocative and powerful insights into the informal, unofficial and sometimes deeply personal elements of education – the assumptions and intentions of policy-makers and educators, the experiences
and engagement of and by learners with formal and informal learning opportunities, and the connections and disconnections between those opportunities and broader sociocultural debates and issues. Similarly, and as posited above, educational research that deploys autoethnographic research methods can contribute in turn to challenging, contesting, extending and enriching autoethnography through its encounters with the set of disciplines constituting educational research.

Accordingly, the Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research is focused on this bidirectional relationship between autoethnography and educational research that provides a bridge between these two scholarly fields, and that highlights each of them as fluid and growing in character, and as exhibiting affordances that can clarify and strengthen the other element in that relationship. From this standpoint, there is much to be gained from exploring in considerable detail, and in multiple contexts, the mutually beneficial meaning-making to be derived from traversing this bridge from both directions. While we acknowledge some recent texts that have crossed this intersection between autoethnography and educational research (Smith, 2013; Tilley-Lubbs & Calva, 2016), the authors of the following chapters and we are convinced of the need for further and continuing work in this scholarly space, including this handbook.

Organising principles for the handbook

Despite having established the boundaries for the focus of this handbook, we note the considerable diversity of possible investigations of the aforementioned bidirectional relationship between autoethnography and educational research, and of the associated interest in the interplay of meanings between these scholarly fields. We elaborate in the next section of this chapter one strategy for maximising the handbook’s coherence: the clustering of the chapters around four distinct themes. In this section, we outline a parallel strategy to attain that coherence: the identification of three organising principles that we intend to convey some of the many potential crossover points between these scholarly fields. These are not designed to constrain the rich variety reflected in the subsequent chapters, but instead to highlight some specific elements of how we as the handbook editors see the character and the significance of these sites of intersection.

The three organising principles that we have selected pertain to pedagogies, positionality and power. For us, these three complex notions constitute dynamic and shifting spaces – littoral zones where the flotsam and jetsam of autoethnography abut against and transform the sedimented residue of educational research. We see these concepts, as well as being spatially fluid, as being politically charged and responsive to the wider interplay of the forces of marginalisation and the attempts at resistance to and transformation of such marginalisation (see also Danaher et al., 2013).

Against this backdrop, as the first organising principle, “pedagogies” distills the relational dimension of learning and teaching: while we recognise that valuable learning can be informal and private in character, mostly learning and teaching require the alignment of interests of a number of mutually dependent stakeholders. Autoethnography can and does contribute much to understanding how such pedagogies are enacted and experienced in diverse ways and with varying short- and longer-term effects, sometimes positive and at other times negative. Likewise, because pedagogies are prevalent and pervasive in educational practice and research, they afford a usefully bounded and grounded set of contexts in which the limits of autoethnography can be stretched and its potential limitations reassessed and addressed.
This bidirectional relationship between pedagogies and autoethnography has been elaborated by several autoethnographic researchers. For instance, Denzin’s seminal work in this scholarly space is well-known, including his articulation (2006) of the profoundly political character of this relationship:

Critical pedagogy, folded into and through performance (auto)ethnography[,] attempts to disrupt and deconstruct these cultural and methodological practices performatively in the name of a more just, democratic, and egalitarian society. Democracy-as-citizenship is radically performative, dialogical, transgressive, pedagogical.

(p. 333)

Taking up the mantle of this capacity of autoethnographic pedagogies to generate powerful and productive educational change, Belbase et al. (2008) accentuated what they saw as “the possibilities of linking autoethnography as a method of inquiry that catalyses the transformative pedagogy positively” (p. 86) – in their case, in the context of mathematics education. Even more explicitly, in their review of Pelias’s (2000) autoethnographic essay entitled “The critical life” – which they called “an autoethnography with attitude” (p. 233) – Banks and Banks (2000) characterised the essay as “autoethnography as pedagogy” (p. 233). In doing so, they communicated a powerful insight whereby “we believed the contexts for interpreting and applying an autoethnographic text should be – perhaps can only be – supplied by readers, not by the author” (p. 233; italics in the original). This contention simultaneously contradicts any depiction of autoethnography as self-indulgent and solipsistic (see also Danaher, 2021) through its wholehearted recognition of the readers and consumers of autoethnographic texts, and reinforces the crucial proposition that effective pedagogy is dialogical in character, as well as depending on authentic engagement by all participants and stakeholders for its intended effects to be actuated. These same indispensable elements of autoethnography as pedagogy were evidenced also in specific educational applications, including a master’s course of autoethnography in international relations (Barr, 2019), and researching educational experiences in Canadian multicultural contexts (Starr, 2010).

In relation to the second organising principle, autoethnographers and educational researchers alike have a profound interest in the “positionality” of learners, educators, educational site and system leaders, educational policy-makers, and other participants and stakeholders in the intentions and effects of educational opportunities. Positionality accentuates the dreams, fears, hopes and resultant actions of individuals and groups, appraised against the critically informed backdrop of the economic, political and sociocultural forces that structure our lives, and in relation to which our agency is enacted. Autoethnography has a crucial, continuing role in helping us to learn from the positionality of ourselves and multiple others, and educational research generates findings about the effects and impact of that positionality on our and others’ educational opportunities and outcomes.

Several autoethnographic researchers have highlighted this bidirectional relationship between positionality and autoethnography. The complex and intimate character of this relationship was encapsulated by Ngunjiri et al. (2010):

Now, as immigrant women of color in the US academy, we unapologetically claim that we are doing autoethnography. The intersection of our socio-identities and the opportunities and challenges we face in the academy has become our positionality; collaborative autoethnography is our method of choice.

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Furthermore, in a synthesising statement that resonates strongly with several of the subsequent chapters, Pitard (2017) enunciated a clarion call for careful and ongoing attentiveness to the fundamental nexus between positionality and autoethnographic research:

… the positionality of the researcher in relation to the data is based upon philosophical beliefs and assumptions accumulated throughout a lifetime which inhabit the unknowing mind of the researcher. Listening to our internal dialogue relies upon that dialogue being spontaneous, springing from a stillness of mind which allows our past experience to guide our present. The examination of this internal dialogue can reveal stimuli from our experiences which we carry with us still.

(p. 2 of 20)

Like so much else about autoethnography, this apprehension of positionality generates considerable ethical concerns and considerations for researchers working in this scholarly space. This was certainly the case in a recent discussion of diverse understandings of equity in engineering education research (Secules et al., 2021), as well as in the account by Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019) of their experiences of “relational positionality” in facilitating their “deliberate repositioning in relation to their field of education, focusing on deliberate self-change and the application of new conceptual learning” (p. 11) in the context of Pasifika education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Such relationality has also been manifested in other educational research studies that have drawn on autoethnography, including investigations of autoethnography and heuristic inquiry in doctoral study (Throne, 2019), the collaborative writing process known as community autoethnography (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2014) and experiences of online dating as a contribution to dialogic autoethnography that yielded the axioms “Theorizing affects how we understand positionality within a story” and “Theorizing is positionality” (Wilkes, 2022, p. 65; italics in the original).

With regard to the third organising principle, the interface between autoethnography and educational research constructed in this handbook provides heightened apprehension of “power” from two principal perspectives. Firstly, education is fundamentally a political practice that empowers some learners, and that perpetuates the disempowerment of other learners, including those from marginalised communities, and educational researchers have both opportunities and obligations to render the powerful intentions and effects of education tangible, visible, and open to contestation and reformation. Secondly, autoethnography has proven itself to be an enduringly empowering research method, with self-narratives of multiple kinds powerfully communicating the experiences and expectations – including those related to education – of individuals and groups.

This identification of power as a significant bidirectional and interdependent organising device that sheds new light on autoethnography and educational research alike has been confirmed by several current and recent studies located at the intersection of these two scholarly fields. Certainly, Bolen (2017) accentuated the politicised dimension of autoethnographic research in a couple of distinct ways. Firstly, “Characterized as a postmodern form of ethnography, autoethnographic research subverts traditional social science” (p. 73), including norms of researchers’ detachment, objectivity and separation from those with whom they research. Secondly, the personal domain that lies at the heart of autoethnography is neither ‘innocent’ nor ‘neutral’: “A rich history of recognizing the personal as political and inseparable from the social and cultural implores autoethnographers to take seriously the cultural, social, and political situatedness of research practices” (p. 74). In a similar vein, Marx et al. (2017) linked critical autoethnography explicitly with deeper and wider political forces, whereby “… the deeply
personal experiences of race, culture, language, sexuality, and other aspects of marginalization and privilege [are connected] to the broader context of education in society” (p. 1). Specific examples of autoethnographic educational research that engaged directly and extensively with questions of power included studies of competitive rowing (Purdy et al., 2008), university academics using participatory visual methodologies (Phelps-Ward et al., 2021), autoethnography as reconciliation in the context of ethnicity, gender and educational leadership (McClellan, 2012), methodological affordances in researching legal education (Campbell, 2016) and working with postgraduate students in a School of Education in a British university (Trahar, 2013). Presenting a strongly resonant distillation of the common denominator of these highly diverse explorations of power in, and the power of, autoethnographic educational research, Gannon (2017) reiterated that “Issues of power and subjugation are also emphasized” in these explorations, and she articulated that “This sensitivity to discursive regimes of power, to the subtleties of context and to a critical orientation to injustice has continued to be central in subsequent autoethnographic research”.

The content and structure of the handbook

The contention of the closely interwoven and mutually reinforcing relationship between autoethnography and educational research that lies at the heart of this handbook, and that was explicated in the preceding section of this chapter, is taken up in the subsequent 27 chapters (written by 38 contributing authors) with regard to four distinct subfields of scholarly endeavour as elaborated below: teaching and teacher education; doctoral study and supervision; identity work and relationship-building; and social justice. Additionally, each of these subfields manifests, within the individual chapters and also across each of the four sections of the handbook aligned with these subfields, the illuminating interplay among pedagogies, positionality and power identified above. In concert, the result is intended to represent a distinctive and timely contribution to maximising the mutually constituted and interdependent meanings of autoethnography and educational research.

The detailed overview of each chapter is presented in the respective section introduction. At this point, it is relevant to record that the geographical coverage of these four sections and 27 chapters is diverse, encompassing research conducted, experiences enacted, and/or researchers located in Africa, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States and Venezuela. Likewise, the handbook traverses a diversity of educational research sub-disciplines, sociocultural concepts, research methods and research paradigms, including activism, arts-based autoethnography, being African, co-constructing experiences, continuing education, critical reflection, decolonising feminism, doctoral student-supervisor relationships, doctoral thesis supervision and examination, educational inclusion, empowerment, external practice, hybrid identities, Indigenous research, learning experiences, methodological fusion, migrant education, multicultural households, outsideness, professional development, racism, researcher self-efficacy, sense-making, teacher identity, visual autoethnography and writing as voice.

This significant diversity notwithstanding, the handbook’s coherence and consistency have been maximised by each section, and each chapter, engaging explicitly with the aforementioned bidirectional relationship between autoethnography and educational research, and by articulating and exemplifying what and how each element in that relationship affords by way of increased understanding of both itself and the other element. Moreover, it is important to note that, in multiple and varied ways, the following chapters have taken up one or more of the three organising principles explicated above.
In further terms of enhancing the handbook’s coherence and consistency, the editors reviewed each chapter abstract prior to its inclusion in the comprehensive handbook proposal, which in turn was reviewed independently by three anonymous reviewers, leading to careful refinements of the proposal. More recently, each chapter has been reviewed comprehensively by at least two of the three editors.

Conclusion

There is recurring and increasing scholarly interest in the ethical and methodological possibilities of autoethnography as research methods in education (understood broadly and inclusively as encompassing learning and/or teaching in diverse forms and ranging from formal and structured on the one hand to informal and incidental on the other hand). Against the backdrop of that scholarly interest, this handbook is centred on continuing debates and contemporary applications related to the intersection between autoethnography and educational research. These continuing debates include the perceived legitimacy and rigour of focusing on the researcher as self, the relationship between that focus and wider conceptualisations of the self, and possible opportunities for engaging productively with multiple manifestations of the other and of otherness. These contemporary applications encompass innovative strategies for building on the undoubted affordances of autoethnography and while also seeking to enhance those affordances, traversing different disciplines and paradigms, and mobilising inter- and trans-disciplinary and -paradigmatic approaches.

As we noted above, the handbook has been framed and informed by three organising devices: pedagogies, positionality and power. It has also been clustered around four touchpoints: teaching and teacher education; doctoral study and supervision; identity work and relationship-building; and social justice. Against that clearly delineated research agenda, the following chapters have been calibrated to generate what we believe to be powerful and significant new insights into the distinctive experiences and understandings situated in the diverse and complex spaces that connect autoethnography and educational research.

References


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