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AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF HYBRID IDENTITIES WITHIN EDUCATION

Jennifer Clutterbuck

Introduction

During my doctoral research into digital educational governance, I visited schools where I was introduced to the staff by a school leader as, “This is Jen – she’s OneSchool”. My field notes taken at the time emphasise the comment written in capitals and circled with exclamations and question marks. OneSchool is a data infrastructure, developed and used by the state education authority in Queensland, Australia to manage 570,000 students’ data across more than 1250 schools. I worked with the OneSchool project team during the development of the student data management system as a business analyst/subject matter expert. Later, in a policy role in one of Queensland’s seven state schooling regional offices, I supported policy-makers, educational managers, and school leaders in their use of OneSchool. It was all a long way from my previous life as an early childhood teacher. I’d had many titles since starting teaching – but never had I been called a data infrastructure! I had an “ethnographic hunch” (Pink, 2021, p. 31) that the rhetoric action of metaphorically describing me as “OneSchool” was important.

OneSchool has been used by educational practitioners, teachers, school leaders, policy officers, and bureaucrats across Queensland to engage with a wide range of student data since its launch in 2008. The OneSchool project commenced in 2006 after a failed international tender process to purchase a replacement school management system. There was an early expectation that Education Queensland, the authority responsible for Queensland’s public education, would purchase multiple systems. However, as “Paul”, a senior bureaucrat explained, the options available at the time “were tiny cottage industry type offerings, of a timetabling map or something. Nothing enterprise grade, nothing school administration and nothing across 1200 type schools.”

OneSchool was developed and continues to be used by the education authority as a policy instrument and “technology of governance” (Clutterbuck, 2022, p. 11). Administration in primary (elementary) and high schools use OneSchool to enrol students, manage school finance records and interrogate aggregated student data. Teachers utilise it to record student attendance, behaviour, and academic progress, manage assessment and reporting, and plan curriculum. The development of OneSchool was informed by business requirements established by a Guiding
Coalition of 150 school leaders and a team of subject matter experts from schools who worked beside the technical developers. And this is where I join the OneSchool narrative. The stories that surround and permeate data infrastructures are shown to travel with them and affect how they are used by educational practitioners; bureaucrats, policy creators, school leaders and teachers (Clutterbuck, 2022; Easterling, 2014). I became entangled in the OneSchool story when in 2007 I became part of the project team. OneSchool and I became so enmeshed that when I visited schools for my research, I was beset by questions and requests for assistance in using the processes and procedures of OneSchool. This became a form of reciprocity and after many interviews I swapped roles from researcher back to the policy officer whom they knew would assist. There was much said and alternatively left unsaid in the school leader’s words of introduction: “This is Jen – she’s OneSchool”.

In this chapter I examine the “ethnographic hunch” (Pink, 2021, p. 31) through new ways of understanding the impact of the relationships that develop between ourselves and infrastructures. I start by situating myself within the research into the vital materiality of OneSchool. The genealogy of ethnography demonstrates how its historical entrenchment in anthropology creates a contemporary means of exploring the acculturation of educational practitioners by data infrastructures that were themselves assimilated to a dominant culture. I relate the manner in which the culture developed within the OneSchool project team, and the ethos formed by the OneSchool infrastructure creates a cybernetic change loop that alters humans and non-humans within the educational ecosystem of Queensland’s state education. I re-present our stories, presenting them again by taking our experiences to compose an “experience-as-story” (Verran, 2021, p. 236). In doing so, I am not representing other individuals – human or non-human – nor am I representing any organisation or institution. I am re-situating (situating again) experiences within my story in the iterative and interpretive practices of writing and reading.

I conclude this chapter by challenging others to recognise the “mutual ontological co-constitutions of knowns and knowers” in their own stories (Verran, 2021, p. 236).

I encourage readers to explore their own diffracted patterns of being that having passed through data infrastructures, illuminate the “indefinite nature of boundaries” (Barad, 2007, p. 135) within which educational practitioners now exist.

**Positioning Jen and OneSchool**

Positioning the relata Jen and OneSchool within the phenomenon of the intra-active becoming of “Jen-as-OneSchool” requires a great deal of teasing apart to understand the concept of identity, and an explanation of how I use particular terms. The “taken-for-granted” understandings, processes and power that belong to terms and concepts used goes beyond semantics, and require definition (Lewis & Holloway, 2018, p. 2). I establish the meaning of key terms on which I rely, by drawing them out from the informing literature. I then place these words in relation to myself and my journey from teacher to infrastructure as I create this text. The process deliberately mirrors the inter-(between) and intra-(within) active becoming of the “Jen-as-OneSchool” phenomenon.

By using the term “relata”, I distinguish the singularity of myself and the OneSchool data infrastructure as separate objects that relate. Interactions require the pre-existence of relata, however, intra-actions do not (Barad, 2007). That is to say, “Jen-as-OneSchool” did not exist prior to its intra-active becoming. In the process of OneSchool and my “cutting together-apart” we emerged entangled. My professional being was “diffracted, dispersed, threaded through
with materializing and sedimented effects of iterative reconfigurings of spacetime-mattering, traces of what might yet (have) happen(ed)” (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Over the previous decade my positionality within the ever-changing spacetime-mattering of education had greatly altered “Jen-the-teacher”. I was now recognised and presented by others as “Jen-as-OneSchool”, rather than “Jen-the-researcher” or “Jen-the-policy officer”. The purpose of exploring this diffracted/intra-active becoming of the identity of “Jen-as-OneSchool” is to establish future impacts on educational practitioners’ positionality and professionality, their relationships with each other, students, and with data infrastructures and data more broadly.

OneSchool is understood as an apparatus in the Baradian sense as it is more than just an instrument used for observing students and schools through the data that it manages. OneSchool is also presented as a “boundary-drawing practice” that re/configures the educational ecosystem in Queensland state schools in a manner that comes to matter (Barad, 2007, p. 140). OneSchool matters in both the context that it is important and in a vital materiality context. ‘Vitality’ is viewed here as the ability to ‘impede or block the will and designs of humans’ (Bennett, 2010, p. viii).

OneSchool’s vitality is identified as users reacted in positive and negative ways to the ‘force of things’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 49). OneSchool is recognised as having its own vitality (Barad, 2007), as having “thing-power” (Bennett, 2010, p. viii) with its matter imbricated with language, discourse, and culture.

As I further interrogate the metaphor of my being OneSchool, the need arises to recognise our culture/s and the acculturation process that occurs between human and non-human. Ruth Benedict (1959) described “culture” as an individual who generally exhibited constant patterns of “thought and action” (p. 46). Culture, as a metaphorical individual, is ascribed a “personality” distinguishable through the repeated customs, values, rituals, beliefs, and preferences. While the acceptance of behaviours as normal is determined through identifying the amount that behaviours are shared (Benedict, 1959).

These definitions of culture assist in the ethnographic exploration of how human enchantments and disenchantments with data infrastructures are due to their being similar or different to their own human “personality”/culture. A Senior Bureaucrat noted a distinctive ‘OneSchool ethos’ that attributed OneSchool with its own character and philosophical stance absorbed from the values, agency and affordances offered by past human and non-human relationships. The culture developed within the OneSchool project team, and the ethos developed by the OneSchool infrastructure are shown to become a cybernetic loop that altered both humans and non-humans within the educational ecosystem of Queensland’s state education. The phenomenon of “Jen-as-OneSchool” was but one example.

Phenomena, for Hacking (1983), were “public, regular, possibly law-like, but perhaps exceptional” (p. 222). Hacking wrote from a scientific perspective; however, I am in agreement with his description that deliberately creating phenomena is “a long hard task” (Hacking, 1983, p. 230). Creating the phenomenon of “Jen-as-OneSchool” took a decade, thousands of kilometres travelled by road and air, eight different professional and academic positions, and simply too many emails, policy documents, readings, local professional and international academic presentations to count. Along the way many tears were shed, and laughter was shared. For Barad (2007), phenomena are quite simply “constitutive of reality” (p. 140) and the intra-active becoming of Jen-as-OneSchool created a reality that came to matter. This is not about self-promotion, as the phenomenon of “Jen-as-OneSchool” could have – and in many other situations was – “Charles-as-OneSchool” or “Teresa-as-OneSchool”. Further analysis work is needed to fully understand the affective agency provided by these hybrid identities on educational practitioners. Lawson et al. (2013) suggest that the “power of storytelling”
enables the exploration of professional identities. The identification of the threshold concepts “professional identity and reflective practice” (Lawson et al., 2013, p. 186) is recognised as enabling the important work of sense making for one’s own healthy (mental and physical), and productive professional being.

I offer my story of identity as a method for my own exploration and as way for others to conduct their own self-exploration. The phenomenon of “Jen-as-OneSchool” provided a way for me to recognise that as I passed through the space/time/matter of OneSchool, my professional presence was re/formed in diffracted patterns. This newly diffracted professionality illuminated the “indefinite nature of boundaries” (Barad, 2007, p. 135) which were created by a range of policies, data and digital infrastructures.

The moments that shaped my methodological decisions

During my doctoral research I explored how the data infrastructure called ‘OneSchool’ governed the practices of educational practitioners in Queensland, Australia. There was a familiarity as I travelled through the human and physical geographies of Queensland’s state schooling for my research. Revisiting the central and regional governing centres as well as four primary schools re-formed and re-assembled the hierarchical geographies of Queensland’s state schooling. These were the environments in which I had developed as a professional educator. I was first an early childhood teacher, curriculum leader, principal in schools within Queensland state education. After 25 years I moved into policy officer and business analyst roles in Central and Regional offices. Across the numerous local and state-wide projects, I accumulated, digested, and never exhausted my questioning of educational governance. Looking back, taking on doctoral research was almost inevitable.

I continue to ponder my methodological decisions almost two years after the conferral of my doctorate. Within my bricolage methodological approach, ethnography as a ‘perspective’ existed side by side with theorising Foucault’s power/knowledge coupling and new feminist materiality. I could have used a variety of methodological and theoretical alternatives. I could have conducted data collection and analysis through an ethnographic or autoethnographic approach, after all I was an insider participant in my areas of research. That is, I was a part of the same spaces, places, and times that I was researching. The choices I made were shaped by moments; these moments are given form in my story.

Knowing that I had the experience and ‘involvement with the struggles taking place in the area in question’ was encouraging, as Foucault (1980) stated that such involvement was required to achieve any “historical work that has political meaning” (p. 64). However, I knew that my knowledge and experience were exactly the characteristics that made me a potential risk to maintaining a dominant bureaucratic discourse that I had experienced frequently during my days in Central Office of “approved messages only” being shared.

As an insider researcher I came to experience first-hand the enacted discourse of controlling the message. The experience also highlighted the benefit and risk of being an insider. Prior to commencing interviews, I conducted a survey, which was made widely available across the state schooling authority through the relevant gatekeepers in Central and Regional offices, primary, secondary, and special purpose schools. One of the Central Office gatekeepers, who I had previously worked with actively declined the invitation. I approached them personally regarding the second stage, in relation to staff participating in the proposed interviews.

Staff in Central Office divisions are often seconded from schools and Regional Offices to work on projects or with teams in a temporary placement role to fulfil staffing requirements.
“Jen, I couldn’t send out that survey to our staff.”

“That’s OK, totally your choice. You are, in research terms the gatekeeper.”

“You know what it’s like in here.” (I had heard over and over again – “you know”)

I nodded, not really understanding the problem.

“Many people in here are seconded from schools and they would do the survey from that perspective. They wouldn’t put the agreed-to Central Office message in the survey and then their opinion would be attributed to Central Office. We couldn’t have that.”

I’m sure my shocked face was taken as agreeance.

“Now if I could send the survey out to Directors and Executive Directors only?”

This request was within with the rights of the gatekeepers to distribute the surveys within their areas as they felt appropriate; however, the survey had closed and was no longer available. This conversation affirmed and intensified the recognition of the separate identities within educational practitioners. Common lexicon would have it that “schoolies” worked in schools and “bureaucrats” worked in Central Office. Once you left the school grounds you became “one of them”. This discourse of schoolie vs bureaucrat permeated the OneSchool project team.

In 2006, I accepted a six-week curriculum position in Central Office, and left my school, there were tears – I loved teaching – but I wanted to extend my circle of influence. I never returned to a school-based role; however, I remained a Queensland-registered teacher. This was a common practice amongst the business analysts, bureaucrats and technocrats who came to work on the OneSchool project. Maintaining teacher registration is recognised as retaining seconded teachers’ and school leaders’ orientation toward students and schools in all decisions, and maintained a link with schools rather than to the policy and political governance centre.

Over the years, I noted the way the language used by each group, “they”, “them” promoted the differences in the “spacetimematterings” of schools and the governing sites of Central and Regional offices. Having been a member of these groups throughout my professional career gave me unequalled access to each as I was never positioned as “the other” as some who (powell & Menendian, 2016). I could be relied on to understand the situation and the reasons why “things” happened or didn’t happen. Prior to the commencement of this research, I had often been asked, in reference to OneSchool, “do ‘they’ know what they’ve got?” This question, referencing OneSchool, was asked by school leaders and teachers, OneSchool business analysts and department bureaucrats. Each asked about the other’s awareness, confident in their own individually located understanding. In recognition that I worked across the at-times complex borders that delineated the different parts of Queensland’s state schooling, this question was often followed by, “Jen, just tell them!”. It was daunting to carry such trust and belief throughout the research and the weight of expectation was daunting. The dedication of my thesis reads: “I have tried to be objective. I do not claim to be detached” (Mills, 2008).

The personal experiences of autoethnographers influence all aspects of the research process. The autoethnographer knows who to ask, when, where and how to ask and finally what questions to ask (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). The trick is to do so within the parameters of both the research institution’s governance and ethics, and the approvals of the researched organisation.

After sending out my interview invitations, one key gatekeeper did not reply. My phone messages and emails received promises of a response, but none were forthcoming. An outsider would have been frustrated, blocked, and left with no choice but to omit the potentially valuable participants. As an insider, I knew another gatekeeper, who was higher up. “Ben” was enthusiastic about my research and agreed to a meeting. At the meeting, the original gatekeeper “Shawn” was also in attendance and spoke of their concern regarding the questions I would
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know to ask. In addition, Shawn explained why I could not have access to a report showing OneSchool usage data. I had requested the data through my first education department’s Approval to Approach research request that had not been approved until I had amended it by removing the data request.

“I’m sorry I had to say no, Jen. That report you wanted would have taken days to create and we would have had to deidentify it which would have taken too long. You know (there’s that phrase again) how busy we are.”

“Yes. However, the report is already created.”

“No, it isn’t. We would have to …”

“In my previous position as policy officer, I helped determine the requirements of the report to inform our work with schools. It’s been available for all regions for a while.”

“We’d have to deidentify it, that takes too long”

“It’s deidentified.” I felt frustrated and looking back I recognise that this was the moment that my identity began to shift. I turned to “Ben.” “I’m in a position where Jen-the-policy officer has access to the report. However, I am conscious that as Jen-the-researcher I do not have access”

I did not gain access to the usage data, but I did gain access to a wider range of participants than I had first requested. Recalling this incident speaks to the benefits and risks of being an insider and autoethnographic research. It also recognises the importance of recognising and promoting different positionalities to reassure others of your ethical behaviour and values. Recalling this ethical dilemma illuminates the complicated “relational ethics” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 281) experienced by autoethnographers when maintaining interpersonal ties with those participants or gatekeepers who were, are or maybe again, colleagues – or line managers.

While I had originally considered an autoethnographic approach for my research, the dilemma of maintaining anonymity and potential risks to participants seemed too great. The relational concerns were foremost in my mind when I decided to forward all participants their interview transcripts for their review. The potential risk was made clear when one participant removed sections of their interview for fear of being recognised by those in upper management. Many participants were known not only to me but to each other and many were friends and colleagues. These relations increased my concern that their anonymity would be compromised and cause relational damage either personally or professionally. This risk was partly realised when I received a response from a participant to whom I had forwarded a conference paper.

“I see you interviewed ‘Wayne’. He always says that; I could hear his voice when I read the paper.” On another occasion I attended a work social, only to find myself surrounded by participants sharing stories about their interviews with me.

While my selected methodological and theoretical approaches worked well to answer my research questions, additional questions that evolved throughout the research remained in archive folders. I was informed many times throughout the writing of my thesis – ‘the thesis is a frozen point in time’ (thank you, Bob), it is not everything, and leave something for your post-doc (thank you, Ian). This chapter explores one such unexplored moment – a simple six-word comment – that stayed with me for six years. To do so, I have taken the principles of autobiography and ethnography to process and produce an autoethnographic (Ellis et al., 2011) rendering of my exploration of this “ethnographic hunch” (Pink, 2021, p. 31). The comment continued to churn and disrupt my understanding of who I was – an insider researcher – not an infrastructure. Ethnographic hunches need to be treated with both “care and confidence”
(Pink, 2021, p. 32). Reflecting on who I was at the beginning of my doctoral journey I had too much of the former and not enough of the latter.

As an insider researcher “caring too much” was a mighty challenge. I had spent more than 35 years as a state education employee, ‘toeing’ the corporate line, (albeit I kicked it a few times). Questions were raised about the perspective of my work – was I Jen-the-researcher or Jen-the-department-employee? And then I found myself with yet another persona; “Jen-the-data infrastructure”! For quite some time I felt debilitated in my writing and analysis from the constant confrontation with my own fractured being. Self-realisation developed that it was neither a requirement nor beneficial to the research, nor even possible, to separate my perspectives and that what made my research unique was the very distinctiveness of my positionality within education’s hierarchical geography.

Rather than exploring these personas separately, I used the resulting compilation to explore the research questions of how the OneSchool infrastructure governed educational practitioners and their practices. In this way I became a researcher who had lived experience in the many human and physical geographies of the researched spaces. Simultaneously, I explored how those same educational practitioners and practices had governed the development of the data infrastructure OneSchool. Such insights were only available to an insider, as government and commercial-in-confidence restrictions on the development of infrastructures are prohibitive for most researchers. The integration of my very ‘being’ into the discourse of policy and data infrastructure was accomplished through an ethnographic perspective (Blommaert, 2018) rather than an ethnographic approach. Maintaining a strong reflexive standpoint as I revisited environments – Central and Regional Offices and schools – strengthened the research.

**Conclusion**

By exploring the diffracted/intra-active becoming of the hybrid identity of Jen-as-OneSchool I have acknowledged other identities that I developed and shed along the way. In doing so I alert those who seek to research within their own spaces of the benefits and risks of being an insider researcher or attempting the process and product of autoethnography. In writing my story I have been focussed on the “ontological constitutions” of the writing and reading acts (Verran, 2021, p. 235). I am never the only participant in my story, and along with my colleagues, as well as the authors I draw on, there are those who read this text. I am joined by you, the reader in the authorship of the discourse of this chapter, which the final work co-constitutively brings into being. This process reoccurs each time the story is read. Every reader has different experiences and knowledges that they bring to these words. It will be a very different text for a Queensland teacher compared to that which is created by an English professor of digital governance. It will also be a very different text if you know me, or if you have never heard of data infrastructures.

I conclude this chapter with a series of challenges. My first challenge for readers is to attend to the places in this text where you have co-configured and participated in creating meaning (Verran, 2021).

Secondly, I challenge you to explore the diffracted/intra-active becoming of your own hybrid identity/ies. What identities have you developed or shed across your professional or personal life?

The final challenge is to determine the impact of your identity that exists within these now illuminated boundaries of “indefinite nature” (Barad, 2007, p. 135) on your relationships with colleagues, students, and with data infrastructures and data more broadly.
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Note

1 Pseudonyms are used for all participants’ names except for my own.

References


