The triple nexus between identity work and relationship-building

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THE TRIPLE NEXUS BETWEEN IDENTITY WORK AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING
A collaborative autoethnography about university continuing education programs for Venezuelan engineers

Emilio A. Anteliz and Paolo Maragno

Introduction
Research about education for the professions is well-developed and continues to grow exponentially (Diachok et al., 2020; Nerland, 2018; Trimmer et al., 2019a, 2019b). Examples of the concerns about professional education in specific occupations traverse enhanced diagnostic capacity in healthcare (Graber et al., 2018), acknowledging the distinctive contributions of community-based teacher educators (Guillen & Zeichner, 2018), the affordances of including virtual reality and computer simulation in social work education (Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020), using digital technologies in nurse education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Leigh et al., 2020) and promoting the value of lifelong learning in medical education (Berkhout et al., 2018). These concerns are at once peculiar to their respective professions and of relevance to many other professions, and they reflect also both the particular domains of professional education and the broader interests of members of contemporary communities who avail themselves of the services provided by these professions.

Likewise, within the scholarly literature pertaining to engineering education, there is a similarly wide range of issues canvassed. These issues include strategies for enhancing the dimension of care in engineering education (Gunckel & Tolbert, 2018), the affordances of virtual reality in teaching construction engineering (Wang et al., 2018), maximising transdisciplinarity in engineering education in order to contribute to global sustainability (Tejedor et al., 2018), mobilising the pedagogical implications of “the practice turn in education studies” (Jørgensen & Brodersen, 2016, p. 3) and ensuring the mutually beneficial links between engineering education practice and engineering education research (Borrego & Bernhard, 2011). Engineering education needs to be as diverse and far-reaching as the disciplines of engineering if it is to prepare and certify professionals with the requisite and relevant knowledge and skills to cater to the continually expanding reach of engineering practice in the contemporary world.
This is true also more specifically of continuing education programs (Klus & Jones, 1975) – sometimes called “continuous education” (Takahara & Kajiwara, 2013), “continuous professional development” (Ferguson, 1998) and “lifelong learning” (Guest, 2006) – designed and delivered for engineers who are already practising within their respective disciplines. As early as 1966, Foecke (1966) stated baldly,

I am convinced that continuing education is the educational challenge of the future, that most of what we have been accustomed to regard as education must be judged in relation to continuing education, and that a frontal attack on the problems of continuing education would yield as a by-product benefits of great value to all “pre-continuing education” (if I may use such a term).

(p. 880; italics in the original)

Since then, and over time, different strategies have been implemented to enact continuing engineering education programs, including particular examples of collaborations between engineering firms and universities (Kazmerski et al., 1975), self-study by individual engineers (Klus & Jones, 1978), provision by “in-house company programs or consultants” (Stukhart, 1989, p. 398), “integrat[ing continuing education] with the other strategic initiatives of the [engineering] firm” (Kaufmann & Weaver, 1995, p. 34), distance learning (Rutz, 2000), work-based learning (Holifield et al., 2008), understanding engineering education from a systems perspective (Adams & Felder, 2008), the impact of mandated “Professional Development Hours” (Beruvides & Ng, 2009, p. 4) for engineers to maintain their professional licences, varied approaches to the inclusion of ethics education in engineering education (Banik et al., 2015), the contribution of online education to promoting engineers’ capacity to facilitate sustainable human development (Pérez-Foguet et al., 2018), debates about the relevance of engineers’ continuing education to the changing needs of industry (Don-Min & Kim, 2019) and advocacy of practice-based education “as a whole-of-education approach embracing complexity” (Mann et al., 2021, p. 27) that can extend the problem-based learning that has long been central to engineering education.

Seen against this backdrop, engineering education more broadly, and continuing education for engineers specifically, emerge as crucial for the engineering profession and for their clients and stakeholders, complex in character, influences and effects, and in important respects contested, in that individual engineers and engineering educators hold divergent and, in some instances, competing views about appropriate curricula, teaching strategies and assessment practices to include in particular programs. These key characteristics help to provide the rationale for our collaborative autoethnographic account in this chapter of selected continuing education programs for practising engineers that we oversaw, developed and implemented in the Faculty of Engineering at the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) in varied iterations between 1999 and 2006. This account builds on our different positions in the Faculty to explicate our accordingly distinctive contributions to the programs and our similarly diverse analyses of the programs’ intentions and outcomes within a shared focus on the programs as a microcosm of engineering practice, sociocultural changes, political trends and technological developments, in Venezuela and more widely.

The particular approach to the collaborative autoethnography presented in the chapter is centred on its exploration of three specific manifestations of the posited nexus between identity work and relationship-building with which the section of the handbook in which this chapter is located is concerned. These manifestations, which are articulated in the following three main
sections of the chapter, are: the chapter’s conceptual framework; the principles underpinning
the program design and development; and our critical reflection on our first deployment of
collaborative autoethnography.

In particular, the chapter accentuates the enduring importance of empowering engineer-
ing education (and associated research projects) against the backdrop of significant ongoing
economic, political and social change. Likewise, collaborative autoethnography emerges as
simultaneously a facilitator of measured self-reflection and a validator of the enduring signifi-
cance of professional associations, clustered around the affordances and insights to be gleaned
from powerful and productive identity work and relationship-building.

**Conceptual framework**

This section of the chapter articulates the nexus between identity work and relationship-build-
ing as revealed in the chapter’s conceptual framework, which is centred on the intersection
among continuing education conceptualised as lifelong learning, identity, relationships and
autoethnography. Each concept is accompanied by a key proposition supported by relevant
scholarly literature.

Firstly, in keeping with this handbook’s focus on educational research, we begin this account
of the chapter’s conceptual framework by proposing that, as sentient beings, humans engage
in a process of continuing education understood here as lifelong learning (Laal et al., 2014; Taylor &
Neimeyer, 2016). In some cases, this learning is formal and credentialled; more often, it is
informal and unofficial, and is manifested as interactions with others and the world that generate
varied kinds of reflections and responses (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Jeong et al., 2018). In
presenting this proposition, we acknowledge its idealised character, and that its realisation is
often beset by challenges and obstacles. Nevertheless, we contend that continuing education as
lifelong learning lies at the heart of identity work, relationship-building and autoethnography,
and, in that regard, is purposeful and directed at effective and sustainable engagement with
relevant elements of our environments.

Secondly, we assert that identity takes multiple forms and has powerful effects, and concomitantly
that identity work attends many human interactions with others, including in professional contexts. This
proposition is premised on the assumption that identity – conceptualised broadly as how we
see ourselves and how we see that others see us – traverses both individual and collective
dimensions (McLay & Renshaw, 2020). Furthermore, although identity is generally held to
be relatively stable over time (American Psychological Association, n.d.), there are instances of
identity shift, sometimes to a significant degree (Carr et al., 2021). Relatedly, identity work,
similarly to continuing education envisaged as lifelong learning, is demonstrably purposeful,
disciplined and oriented to enhancing individuals’ and groups’ interactions with the world
(Kwon, 2021; Vetter et al., 2022).

Thirdly, we argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between identity work and relationship-build-
ing, and that it is through well-developed relationships with diverse others that we find out more about
our own identities and those of significant others in our lives. Multiple sites of this reciprocal rela-
tionship have been researched, including young people using social media as they transition to
university (Thomas et al., 2017), the practices of bonding and bridging through participation
in sport (Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009) and the knowledge-sharing strategies of beginning
digital entrepreneurs (Horst & Hitters, 2020). Again, as with the first two concepts in this
conceptual framework, relationship-building is posited as being purposeful, disciplined and
directed at enhancing personal and professional understandings of our places in current and potentially reimagined future worlds.

Fourthly and finally, we contend that autoethnography in general, and collaborative autoethnography in particular, synthesise the three other concepts of continuing education understood as lifelong learning, identity work and relationship-building that in concert constitute this chapter's conceptual framework. This synthesis was conveyed partly by Méndez's (2013) identification of a key methodological strength of autoethnography:

An important advantage … is the potential of autoethnography to contribute to others' lives by making them reflect on and empathise with the narratives presented. Through reading a cultural or social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before, which makes autoethnography a valuable form of inquiry.

(p. 282)

This encapsulation highlighted the crucial relationships between autoethnographic authors and readers, and the potentially transformative meaning-making that both groups of participants can experience by engaging in and with autoethnographies of various kinds. From this perspective, it is instructive to recall Ellis et al.’s (2011) articulation of two of the “Potentials” (p. 278) of autoethnography that also accentuate lifelong learning, identity work and relationship-building: “Writing as Therapeutic” (p. 280); and “Relational Ethics” (p. 281). Finally in this conceptual framework elaboration, it is worthwhile citing in full Chang’s (2016) summation of the distinguishing features, strengths and potential limitations of collaborative autoethnography, the methodological approach adopted in this chapter:

Collaborative autoethnography … engages multiple authors and multiple, although not always diverse, perspectives. This means that collaborative autoethnographers need to consider one more layer of intersubjectivity, namely among researchers. In the struggle of balancing diverse perspectives, author–researcher–participants are encouraged to listen to each other’s voices, examine their own assumptions, and challenge other perspectives. This process sharpens their collective interpretation of multiple perspectives and keeps everyone accountable for the process and [the] product. However, the benefit of including multiple voices is also accompanied by the limitation of added complexity. Because collaborative autoethnography involves more than one researcher, the research team may end up spending significant time coming to consensus about the process, negotiating conflicting perspectives, and addressing miscommunication within the team. In the negotiating process, the brilliance of individual stories may be dulled by the need to reach a consensus or be marginalized by a dominant voice.

(pp. 111–112)

In writing this chapter, we were certainly mindful of these cautionary words by Chang (2016). Nevertheless, our experience was that the benefits of our collaborative approach to this particular autoethnography outweighed considerably these potential risks. At the same time, and from the perspective of the chapter’s conceptual framework outlined here, we found that co-writing the chapter facilitated for us severally and together continuing education conceptualised as
lifelong learning, identity work and relationship-building through our interactions with each other in the context of this co-writing.

Program design and development

Against the backdrop of the conceptual framework presented in the preceding section, this section of the chapter relates the authors’ experiences regarding the 1997–2006 management of the Technological Institute (the Coordination of Extension since 2000) attached to the Faculty of Engineering at UCV, with an emphasis on the initiatives that led to a break with past practices, such as the establishment of a new functional model and a different way of linking with the context.

Firstly, it is necessary to introduce a few paragraphs with the purpose of providing readers with the necessary background in order to understand the nature of the institution where the management experience was developed, as well as some elements of the Venezuelan university, economic and sociopolitical context at the end of the 1990s, which will facilitate comprehension of the scope of the changes. However, these are not the objectives of this work, but merely a preamble to it.

The Technological Institute effectively began its functions at the beginning of the 1970s, although its foundation dates back to 1966 (Méndez, 2011). Its creation fulfilled a strong need, both of the Faculty and of the academics and researchers, to generate income in addition to the standard budget granted by the State. It also had the broader objective of providing professional services to support the growth of the emerging national industry, by delivering specific courses for engineering personnel, as well as carrying out applied research projects.

With this, it contributed to relieving a deficiency in the Venezuelan “research–development–marketing” triad. Even though since the 1950s numerous “pure” research centres had been created (such as the IVIC [the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research], university laboratories, etc.) (Maragno, 2002), the foundation of institutions to develop products and services – decisive factors for enabling local technology production – took place in a very limited, if not exiguous, number.

An entity such as the Technological Institute was also conveniently framed within the efforts undertaken in the early 1960s by the national government to industrialise the country, through a state policy known as “Industrialisation by Import Substitution (ISI)”. This policy provided temporary protection to emerging industries through direct subsidies and import control, creating a de facto protected environment, without the need to confront external competition. However, this situation, which lasted too long, induced a large number of companies to operate with very poorly qualified personnel and a low technological level, without suffering extreme consequences, at least until the ISI came to an end in the early 1980s, when the sector’s lack of preparation to operate in a free market environment led to an extremely serious crisis.

Now let us take a look at the institutional context. The Technological Institute was a dependency of UCV’s Faculty of Engineering, with the rank of Directorate, and its operation was governed by the Venezuelan Law of Universities and by very conservative academic-administrative protocols. These were designed to be applied to a scholastic system, focused on the teaching of formative subjects and on research limited to laboratories and scientific publications.

For these reasons, since its very beginning the Institute had been managed with many administrative and bureaucratic restrictions, especially in the decision-making process and in
allocating resources. The university organisation was absolutely pyramidal, so that the approval of each issue had to undergo a process that started at the base, constituted by Departments and School Councils, until it finally reached the highest decision-making body, the University Council.

Specifically, its procedures were governed by the Additional Incomes Statute, which strongly penalised the staff who performed the services, because its remuneration share was tiny compared to that assigned to the university dependencies. In addition, these regulations contained conditions that delayed the execution and payment of services, which resulted in the late 1990s in a lack of motivation by diverse personnel to attend to the Institute’s requests.

At UCV, there was also a cultural factor in opposition to the objectives of the Institute, constituted by the conviction of many notable academics and researchers, many times drivers of university policy, that the academic and administrative staff should be exclusively devoted to formal teaching and pure research, and should not be contaminated by the generation of incomes other than those included in the university salary table.

These were the circumstances at the beginning of our administration, at the end of the 1990s, so that it was very difficult for the Institute to undertake policies of change that would lead to attaining a relative freedom of decision, quick actions, greater administrative agility, its own resources and a highly motivated team, indispensable conditions to succeed in establishing and increasing connections with the productive sector.

In this context, and with the approval of the Faculty authorities, who proved politically courageous in supporting the changes, a new institutional model was drawn up that resembled those adopted by corporations. These developments also included physical changes in the workspace, with the purpose of offering a corporate image that was architecturally modern and pleasant, in order to inspire confidence in clients. It was our conviction as well that, to increase the acceptance of the Institute’s services by companies, we had to influence three crucial aspects – namely: the personnel; the way of relating to the context; and the structure of courses.

Before then, the Institute’s functions had been carried out by a Director and a part-time Head of Division, accompanied by a small number of administrative employees, a workforce that was clearly insufficient to undertake a linkage project with the business sector on a certain scale. Therefore, the Faculty was asked to hire a group of collaborators with whom we became progressively integrated as a team. These collaborators oversaw the most critical task for the project’s success, which consisted of establishing relationships with the Venezuelan companies and with the academics and researchers who had to provide the services. At a time when social networks did not exist, a relational marketing strategy was adopted, made up of visits, invitations and clients’ involvement in the scientific and cultural activities of the Faculty. This strategy was complemented by the extensive use of electronic mail, an instrument that, by then, had begun to replace the fax machine.

The most outstanding aspect of this process, however, was to maintain at all times a high motivation and satisfaction level of the team, factors that were stimulated through the establishment of productivity bonuses and the building of not only work connections but also social relations, both with businesspeople and with high-level university personnel, which resulted in official acknowledgements and, in general, in broad recognition from the university community. These initiatives were made possible by reforming the Institute’s procedures, which were framed in UCV’s Additional Incomes Statute, and, for this reason, the changes to be undertaken required considerable effort, since they had to be approved by all decision-making bodies, up to the University Council.
One significant change was to establish more substantial participation shares for academics and researchers in the profit distribution derived from courses and services, as well as the creation of a participation bonus for promoters. These measures were opposed, for a long time, by the conservative academic wing present at UCV, but finally the strength of the results obtained ended up prevailing, revealing itself as one of the fundamental pieces for the success and growth of the Institute.

In a strictly academic aspect, it was observed that the Institute had been teaching mainly individual courses on demand from the companies, which had the purpose of solving contingent problems of personnel training. But, since the new academic model that we were designing was intended to create a continuing education system, we began to reduce progressively the number of these types of courses, convincing those responsible for company personnel that their main interest should be professional improvement and updating, not simply training.

At the same time, we developed an offer consisting of sets of courses, named “Professional Certifications”, structured in a modular and sequential manner, with coherence of objectives and duration suitable for granting official certifications. The aim was to cover those engineering areas not included in formal undergraduate and postgraduate courses, providing knowledge of technological frontiers or of very specialised aspects of professional practices. These Professional Certifications consisted of theoretical and practical activities, as well as an evaluation of each module that comprised them.

These certification programs had an issuing schedule of several months, and they were carried out at the Institute’s facilities located in Caracas, the capital of the country, or at the companies’ headquarters, sometimes located in other parts of the national territory, which required significant logistical efforts. Refreshments were offered to the participants, as well as the didactic materials related to the contents taught and an official certificate from UCV upon the successful completion of the program. In this way, the foundations were laid for a true system of continuing education for engineering professionals, graduated from all universities in the country, both undergraduate and graduate.

With specific reference to the triple nexus between identity work and relationship-building analysed in this chapter, several facets of this nexus were manifested in this section’s account of the principles underlying the design and development of the continuing education programs for working engineers. The next section in the chapter elaborates the facet related to our professional and personal investment in the events outlined here. These events have also highlighted this nexus as exhibited by several different groups of stakeholders, including fellow team members in administering the programs, the academics who conducted the courses, other UCV colleagues who at different times adopted positions ranging from endorsement to opposition in relation to the programs, the engineers who studied the courses, their respective engineering firms that approved that study and other members of the wider Venezuelan engineering profession who in varied ways became aware of, and expressed opinions about, the programs. For all these highly diverse stakeholders, their attitudes and actions towards the programs revealed much about their respective aspirations and interests, which in turn framed their particular strategies of identity work and relationship-building. From that perspective, these continuing education programs for Venezuelan engineers assumed a broader significance, by acting as a kind of litmus test and a lightning rod for pre-existing and shifting interactions in Venezuelan public policy related to engineering education at this time.
Critical reflection on collaborative autoethnography

This chapter constitutes our first experience of engaging in collaborative autoethnography, which we hope to progress in subsequent publications. In this section, we reflect critically on that experience as it applied to our specific research focus on engineering education in Venezuela.

As we noted above, the chapter’s conceptual framework was clustered around the four concepts of lifelong learning, identity, relationships and autoethnography. That framework was organised also around four propositions:

1. Humans engage in a process of continuing education understood here as lifelong learning.
2. Identity takes multiple forms and has powerful effects, and concomitantly identity work attends many human interactions with others, including in professional contexts.
3. There is a reciprocal relationship between identity work and relationship-building, and it is through well-developed relationships with diverse others that we find out more about our own identities and those of significant others in our lives.
4. Autoethnography in general, and collaborative autoethnography in particular, synthesise the three other concepts of continuing education understood as lifelong learning, identity work and relationship-building that in concert constitute this chapter’s conceptual framework.

At one level, conducting this collaborative autoethnography has afforded us the opportunity to re-engage in events that occurred between 16 and 23 years ago. At the time, from our shared and separate perspectives, we experienced those events as simultaneously exciting, frustrating, stressful, productive and transforming, for ourselves and for others. Aided by the greater detachment related to the passage of time since then, co-authoring this chapter has given us fresh insights into why we sought to develop the continuing education programs in particular ways, what we perceived as the enabling and constraining factors informing that development, whom we cultivated as allies in that development, which strategies we employed to interact with both allies and opponents, and how we felt as specific events occurred throughout the process.

At another level, and with accentuated reference to the nexus between identity work and relationship-building on which this chapter is focused, this collaborative autoethnography has enabled us to see with greater clarity how, during the events outlined in the chapter, we engaged in identity work in varied forms. These forms included our roles as professional engineers, as members of the UCV community, as Faculty officials and as university colleagues. Yet these forms included also, and depended vitally on, more personal and private dimensions of our identities, including the exercise of our personalities, the mobilisation of our friendships and the application of our respective networks of contacts in order to gain resources and to secure longer-term support for the programs. From that perspective, our relationship-building served to facilitate our identity work, which in turn extended and enriched our relationships.

At yet another and even more individual level, this collaborative autoethnography has helped to reaffirm the character and value of our collegial relationship with each other. Over time, during the events recounted here, we grew to trust and depend on each other as close allies in the efforts to develop and sustain the programs. Relatedly, we enjoyed each other’s company, and we shared certain core values of professional conduct and relational ethics. Even though
we have both left UCV, we maintain contact with each other, and we support the other person’s continuing lifelong learning. This collaborative autoethnography has presented a timely reminder of how important that contact and support are to both of us.

**Conclusion**

As this handbook highlights, educational research takes multiple forms and is actuated by diverse intentions. This chapter has focused on research related to engineering education – specifically, university continuing education for Venezuelan working engineers. That research is underpinned by a commitment to the ongoing importance of lifelong learning – even more so in the contexts of conflict, instability and uncertainty that characterise the contemporary world.

The chapter elaborated a conceptual framework (which we hope to deploy also in future publications) centred on the intersections among lifelong learning, identity, relationships and autoethnography. In particular, we posited a triple nexus among identity work and relationship-building clustered around the conceptual framework, the principles of the engineering education programs that we designed and developed, and the collaborative autoethnography represented by this co-authored chapter.

We reflect that collaborative autoethnography has been enabling and transforming in three ways: by affording the opportunity to reflect a new perspective on these events from 15 to 20 years ago; by giving us specialist language to analyse those events in ways that were not available to us at that time; and by generating ideas and insights for potential prospective collaborations. Certainly, the fundamental nexus between identity work and relationship-building was and remains central to who we were and are, and to what we did and do – all those years ago, as well as into the future.

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**References**


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