THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Edited by Jeroen Huisman
and Malcolm Tight

THEORY AND METHOD IN
HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

VOLUME 10

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Series Editors: Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight

Recent Volumes:

Volume 1: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2015

Volume 2: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2016

Volume 3: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2017

Volume 4: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2018

Volume 5: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2019

Volume 6: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2020

Volume 7: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2021

Volume 8: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2022

Volume 9: Theory and Method in Higher Education Research. Edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight; 2023

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH VOLUME 10

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

EDITED BY

JEROEN HUISMAN
Ghent University, Belgium

AND

MALCOLM TIGHT
Lancaster University, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

Editorial matter and selection © 2025 Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight.
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.
Individual chapters © 2025 by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licencing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Centre. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83608-717-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83608-716-8 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83608-718-2 (Epub)

ISSN: 2056-3752 (Series)

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Monia Anzivino	University of Trento, Italy
Victoria A. Bauer	Leibniz University Hannover, Germany
Richard Budd	Lancaster University, UK
Kristyna Campbell	University College London, UK
Louise Drumm	Edinburgh Napier University, UK
Irina V. Gewinner	Leibniz University Hannover, Germany
Elisabeth Hovdhaugen	Nordic Institute for Studies of Innovation, Research and Education, Norway
Jeroen Huisman	Ghent University, Belgium
Nathalie Ann Köbli	University of Vienna, Austria
Mara Osterburg	German Center for Higher Education and Science Research (DZHW), Germany
Karlijn Soppe	Utrecht University, The Netherlands
Malcolm Tight	Lancaster University, UK

This page intentionally left blank

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This is the 2024 volume in the annual series *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, which we launched in 2013 in the belief that there was a need to provide a forum specifically for higher education researchers to discuss issues of theory and method.

Four contributions in this volume are theoretical or conceptual. Budd reflects on the use of the 'landscape' metaphor by higher education scholars; Bauer offers a holistic framework for analysing student behaviour; Gewinner, Bauer and Osterburg address gendered career choices in STEM; and Köbli argues that Bourdieu's theory could be enriched with insights from posthumanist theorising.

Methodological contributions include those of Hovdhaugen and Anzivino on measuring student departure, Soppe and Huisman on the use and pitfalls of replication studies, whereas both Campbell and Tight offer reflections on autoethnography in higher education research.

One contribution addresses both theoretical and methodological issues. Drumm explains the relevance of the rhizome perspective in higher education research.

As in previous years, this volume displays an international authorship, although this time we 'only' have contributions from European scholars. Authors stem from the United Kingdom (4), Germany (3), Belgium (1), the Netherlands (1), Austria (1), Norway (1) and Italy (1).

Anyone interested in contributing a chapter to a future volume is invited to get in touch with Malcolm Tight.

Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight

This page intentionally left blank

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: POSTGRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ACADEMY

Kristyna Campbell

University College London, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of the qualitative research method autoethnography as a tool for early career researcher's professional development. In particular, the method is considered for postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs) working within higher education. Autoethnography has been conceptualised as a powerful reflexive tool, facilitating identity and transition work, something the author has explored in earlier scholarship examining role change, boundary crossing, and labelling in the academy. Following on from an introduction to the method and the role of the PGTA in the academy, the author explores a series of peer-reviewed autoethnographic articles, all of which are situated within higher education. These texts, in addition to the author's own, reveal themes pertaining to growth, interrelatedness and self-perception. This discussion portrays the significance of reflexive practice, the value of holding conversation with and of the self, and notably learning about the self in relation to other.

Keywords: Autoethnography; reflexive practice; postgraduate teaching assistant; higher education; professional development

INTRODUCTION: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE PGTA

In this chapter, I explore the use of the qualitative research method autoethnography in the context of higher education. In particular, I focus on its capacity to enrich the understanding of identity and personal development within the academy for PGTAs. This reflexive method is carried out by individuals to

Theory and Method in Higher Education Research, Volume 10, 1–17
Copyright © 2025 by Emerald Publishing Limited
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved
ISSN: 2056-3752/doi:10.1108/S2056-375220240000010001

investigate the self in relation to other (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022) and is a means for exhibiting personal experience in the public sphere, by making connections between the personal and emotive with culture and the wider world. Autoethnography is often perceived as a story or conversation with the self about the self, with a recognition and synthesis of pertinent scholarship on emerging topics. As the growing field of autoethnography demonstrates, these accounts can be shared in abstract and creative ways, ranging from essays to plays (Vasconcelos, 2011).

I first encountered this method as I began work on a recent article on PGTAs in third space, a metaphorical terrain characterised by collaboration and participants from across different professional and academic domains sharing expertise (Veles, 2020; Whitchurch, 2015). Carrying out self-introspection in this way supported me to learn about the ways in which I perceived myself and others within this setting and how our interconnected beliefs and behaviours shaped who I was becoming whilst on the transitional path to early career academic. I will outline some of my discoveries later in the chapter, as I introduce three alternate cases of autoethnography in the academy to examine its value in developing identification.

The literature on PGTAs is growing gradually as this body of temporary workers expands in higher education. While they appear to offer significant benefits to the academy, including their being an affordable workforce, their existing membership in the organisation, and their closeness in experience to the students that they facilitate, a number of tensions also arise (Partin, 2018). PGTAs have expressed great issue with the temporary and precarious nature of their employment, often suggesting that they are not compensated fairly for their contributions to the teaching and learning experience. Researchers have also pointed to the lack of opportunities for feedback by PGTAs to their programmes and on their teaching, leading to insufficient support networks and training for these boundary practitioners (Park & Ramos, 2002; Slack & Pownall, 2023). That they are not often embraced by the existing community of staff within institutions is telling of the perceptions held by staff and students about the PGTA's role in the academy, and how they have trouble fitting into existing structures (Adefila, 2023; Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017; Wald & Harland, 2018).

As an early career researcher, I have employed a variety of reflective practices throughout my doctoral studies in order to enrich my understanding of my experiences of teaching and learning. In earlier publications, I explored the use of autobiography to capture the renegotiation of identity through changing employment (Campbell, 2022), followed by a series of collaborative observations with colleagues through an ethic of care lens in higher education (Campbell et al., 2023), and of late, the use of autoethnography and vignettes has helped me to consider the PGTA as blended professional (Campbell, 2024), known predominantly to the literature on higher education as an individual that partially participates in multiple practices simultaneously due to the fusion of academic and professional roles (Whitchurch, 2015). This research has led me to discover new meanings pertaining to my professional development and unearthed strategies that have helped me to implement some of the skills acquired. The narratives depicted in my earlier publications can be

illustrated through Ellis and Bochner's (2000: 737) conceptualisation, as they offer a process of gradual understanding through storytelling and meaning making. They state that

> I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic, sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life.

Autoethnography is thought to be engaging and evocative, it draws in the reader using highly descriptive language that is both accessible and relatable. It uses the author as the insider, the tool, to root around and to self-discover. The experience of autoethnography is recognised as both a method and a process (Ellis et al., 2011); it demonstrates how one can be simultaneously a part of and apart from society, it involves looking in and looking out and ultimately tells intimate stories for readers to connect with and learn from (Denshire, 2014; Reed-Danahay, 2019). A key rationale for pairing the autoethnographic method with the PGTA practice stems from Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2022, pp. 219–220) claim that, 'Autoethnography offers marginalized academics a contained space to confront their unpleasant feelings, including anxiety, to negotiate a reflexive, ethical, and scholarly self'.

I explore the use of this method in enriching the experience and professional development of PGTAs and consider how other scholars have used this to develop their own understanding of identity and their surroundings. The chapter explores how to carry out autoethnography, what can be achieved by learning about and implementing this method, what significance this practice has to PGTAs and how established members of the academy can support the development of PGTAs by experimenting with this reflexive activity. I then introduce three pieces of autoethnography to the discussion in addition to my own experience with the method to explore how it has been implemented by academics to enrich their teaching and learning practices. The chapter is drawn to a close with acknowledgement of the limitations of the approach and the contributions it makes to the experience of PGTAs in the academy.

DOING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The field of autoethnography is full of articulations of how to carry out autoethnographic practice. Notably, the work of Ellis (2009) has offered an insightful conceptualisation, as a springboard for contemporary scholars looking to explore their inner-most feelings about the self and other in order to understand their connection with the world.

In a recent publication, Ellis et al. (2011: para 8) claim that

> When researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences.

In this section, I will outline these stages as exhibited in the literature. The autoethnographic platform lays bare the vulnerabilities and subjectivities of an individual, enticing audiences in to view experience through a new lens, to create relationships with the stories and to consider the information in the context of their own lives.

In their seminal collection on autoethnography, Adams et al. (2015: 2) outline the rationale for carrying out this practice and how to determine whether it meets the intended objectives. They explain that autoethnography

- 'Uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others.
- Uses deep and careful self-reflection – typically referred to as 'reflexivity' – to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.
- Shows 'people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles'.
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion, and creativity and
- Strives for social justice and to make life better.'

Keles (2022) suggests a series of prerequisites for a successful autoethnography, as detailed by Bochner and Ellis (2016). They state that the accounts ought to be rich, with riveting descriptions to heighten the senses. Through the presence of time, characters and emotive language, they consider how the reader falls into the palms of the writer, believing in the micro-moments and the transformations. Accounts should exhibit periods of self-questioning and reflexivity, of discovery as the individual comes to determine who and how they are, and why (Ellis, 2004), based on how they perceive the insider and outsiders of the experience.

Existing literature conveys the diversified ways that autoethnography can be used to enrich professional development and practice, in particular, within the academy (Trahar, 2013; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022). Predominantly, this exercise supports a practitioner to peel open the many layers of experience and to not simply look around but to look inwards, to be inquisitive, and to make meaning of the multifaceted encounters that have shaped the ways they identify with their role. The knowledge generated from this self-analysis helps to inform the practitioner about their relation to culture and the wider setting in which their practice is situated (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Denzin, 1997).

While the experience of autoethnography has been conceptualised as both a method and a product (Ellis et al., 2011), it goes beyond consideration for the individual and their intimate involvement, capturing messages pertaining to culture, community and society (Reed-Danahay, 2019). This method supports the practitioner to observe and become conscious of their lived reality; in compiling these reflections, they are able to be critical, revealing how these encounters impress on their self-perception or self-definition, as well as understanding who they are and how they exist in the social world (Denshire, 2014).

While, historically, the significance of gathering unique reflections of experience has been disputed due to a lack of generalisability, scholars have begun promoting the use of autoethnography as a catalyst for transmitting relatable and untold stories that can connect to and with readers. Ellis' (2004) earlier work argues that autoethnographic accounts should speak to a reader. Similarly, Vasconcelos (2011: 418), in their reflections on the relationships and encounters that shape the student and teacher, develops evocative snapshots, contending that they fulfil this activity 'in the hope that the meanings embedded in my life stories might have relevance to other teachers' and students' memories, experiences, and practices'. These often empathetic and other times unspoken narratives can extend a branch towards another situated or contested facet of society (Adams et al., 2015, p. 103), expanding our understanding of prevailing conditions.

DOING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: PGTAS

Throughout this chapter, I argue for the significance of autoethnographic practice for PGTAs. In an earlier article (Campbell, 2024), I contend that this exercise supported me to better understand my position and role within the academy, albeit revealing some dissatisfactory conditions and conflicts. Being reflexive in this way encouraged me to intimately explore micro-moments that have lingered, which have created a ripple effect, impressing upon wide-ranging areas of my practice as both a student and scholar. Engaging in autoethnography inspired me to look inwards at myself, and to consider my values, behaviours and beliefs, and how I transmit these in different spheres of practice. This process led me to ask questions about the way I am, the things I do and to connect these instances with spaces and the characters within. The cases I draw upon in this chapter by Vasconcelos (2011), Trahar (2013) and Kinchin and Thumser (2023), also portray the value of this method, as these scholars each explore the transition and transformation undertaken in their development within the academy. In their articles, common themes relate to the experience of belonging, becoming, emotion, documentation, tension and interconnection.

Knowledge of the PGTA positioning within the academy was unearthed as I placed an understanding of myself and my professional experiences in the context of the institutional culture (Adams et al., 2015). I considered the cultures and communities developed within this environment and the role that I played in those spaces, which seemed to be influenced considerably by the structures implemented as a result of social and historic implications. Although the PGTA role is widely understood as comprising multiple identities, due to its association with the doctoral candidate, being reflexive about this enabled me to grasp knowledge of the advantages that being situated on a boundary or in a liminal role can have.

A PGTA is often assigned hours in a week where they are required to fulfil their teaching duties. However emerging literature on this practice has revealed

that PGTA duties can be wide-ranging and inconsistent throughout institutions, leading practitioners to have contrasting experiences of teaching, marking, material preparation and leading, amongst other skillsets (Clark et al., 2021). Arguably, the experience of teaching in this role can be informed by the relationships established in the academic community and with colleagues who are worked closely with. For instance, the PGTA might carry out their role alongside other PGTAs or alongside a module or programme leader. These relationships can influence the experience of belonging and identification. By integrating the autoethnographic method, the student-turned teacher can capture freeze-frames in which moments of activity changed the way they felt, understood or perceived their practice. This method gives voice to these undocumented moments (Kinchin & Thumser, 2023).

In Vasconcelos' (2011, p. 416) article, through snapshots that critically analyse their past and present selves, they explain how 'The teacher I am is impacted by the student I was'. This points to the significance of recognising the influence of the other on our understandings of self, through bringing together the emotional with the professional. Their memories of encounters in the classroom with their peers and the exchanges with staff who trained and challenged them underscore turning points and pivotal decisions taken as they moved closer to who they were becoming. Interestingly, Vasconcelos reflects on the impression of student–teacher–student in a continuum, suggesting that as a student they were influenced by their teachers who were influenced in their practices by them as a student and now as a teacher the students influence them. In this setting, the agents cannot be separated, nor can they be unaffected by the overarching culture of the space, whether this is thought to be inclusive or exclusive.

Contemporary literature demonstrates how identifying with the culture of the academy can be problematic for PGTAs as they are situated on the periphery of different memberships: the staff body and the doctoral community. This can lead the individual to crafting alternative versions of an academic identity to be carried out in the same setting; these can pertain to different roles and demands and can be mirrored in the behaviours of colleagues or peers (Slack & Pownall, 2023). The PGTA role however is widely recognised as being part of professional development; it is a steppingstone to a more secure academic position. Based on this, practicing autoethnography can be considered an effective way to self-examine and document the ways that these practices contributed to one another or have evolved simultaneously. Reflexively moving between experience in this way has been known to obscure the division between settings and periods in time (Ellis, 1999). This can be done in innovative and creative ways, not simply through diary entries or short extracts, nevertheless creating a map on which to plot the significant changes encountered over the teaching and learning experience (Phan, 2023).

PGTAs are an under-researched and under-acknowledged body of contributors to the teaching and learning experience in higher education; however, conducting autoethnography can reveal the transformative nature of our work. To ensure that this exercise creates impact, the writer must work to develop lived stories that are accessible (Adams et al., 2015); this is essential for practitioners to

feel 'seen' (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022). Readers within the academy are offered insight into the conflicts and nuances of our practice, they are informed about the ways that our role is perceived by others and how this can impress on our ability and confidence to flourish in the setting, while our counterparts may feel noticed, valued, empathetic and not alone. In reading the experiences of others, strategies for coping can be developed, and this new social knowledge can be employed to inform the way that support is developed for novice academics (Keles, 2022; Kinchin & Thumser, 2023).

In terms of the PGTA experience, it is first important to consider that the label 'PGTA' is given to a particular role in the academy and thus does not capture the full set of identities held by an individual. As such, when this individual carries out reflexivity on their professional development and practice, it is probable that some of the listed features below will help to structure their accounts:

- Consideration for relationships with others in the academy: supervisors, line-managers, fellow PGTAs, and students under PGTA supervision.
- Development of teaching practice: autonomy in the classroom, teaching/learning interventions, responsibility/accountability, confidence and self-perception in the role.
- Negotiation of academic identity: feelings of belonging to the academic community, modelling the behaviours, values and beliefs of collective identity, and socialisation into wider institutional structures.

In order to effectively and critically discuss the aforementioned encounters in the academy, the PGTA might consider engaging with existing research and synthesising this with their own experience. Indeed, they might also open up the dialogue on uncommunicated encounters from within the space through accessible and intimate language to draw in a much-needed audience with whom change may be instigated.

DOING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

In my research on the PGTA role in higher education, specifically on the impact of labelling in the academy, and in an attempt to address some of the conflicts encountered by PGTAs, I have come to believe that use of the autoethnographic method by established members of the academic community could have significant implications for the professional development of PGTAs, even indirectly. Here, I underscore the ways that others might utilise this reflexive activity to enrich their understanding of the cultures within which they are situated and also of the relationships formed within – in particular, revealing the perceptions held of the PGTA in relation to the staff and student populations.

Indeed, as the number of autoethnographers in the academy grows, it is probable that there will be greater acknowledgement of the inconsistencies and discrepancies between academic practices and positions. This is where

autoethnography thrives, unearthing the subjectivities of experience (Ellis et al., 2011), and indeed through this style of storytelling, issues of power, exclusion, oppression and difference may be unearthed. These stories can be rich, descriptive and vastly different from one another, broadening our understanding of growth within the academy and through the life course (Vasconcelos, 2011). Existing literature points to the ambiguity of the PGTA role, as these early career individuals pursue a variety of responsibilities and demands (Wald & Harland, 2018), though this is not widely reported on by individuals outside of the PGTA community. Bringing members of the community like early career staff into the discussion on identity politics and power discourses experienced by PGTAs may well help to address the injustices encountered in the academy (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022).

Acknowledgement of the contributions made by these temporary workers by others in the community might help to bring a conversation about liminality in the academy to the table. This may help to address PGTA experiences with institutional structures and the issues they face with fitting in to these, ultimately enriching the understanding of how PGTAs might be supported to identify more closely with a collective. Vasconcelos (2011, p. 432) in their autoethnography reports that 'My sweetest memories come from the moments and times when my presence was acknowledged and my voice was heard by my teachers'. Indeed, as argued in Mills (1959, p. 3), 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' and thus it stands to reason that, in considering the individual experience of academic practice, the extensive tapestry of interconnected others and situational characteristics working in this environment should also be examined (Adams et al., 2015).

In sharing reflective methods that support practitioners to enrich the way they engage with and make sense of the interactions in their professional settings, autoethnography may create space for PGTAs to be thought about in relation to others, to be bought in from the periphery, to be considered in the wider frame of activity and society, and to become a part of the language of the setting. In turn, it is possible that enhanced awareness of the role that these early career individuals play in the academy may reshape the support structures provided to them, tailoring the way that they target identity development and community building. Undertaking autoethnography enables the practitioner to connect their personal self with their multifaceted surroundings; from the knowledge developed during this process, individuals may feel compelled to respond to and reshape their relational practice (Campbell et al., 2023).

THE CASE OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In earlier work (Campbell, 2024), I employed the autoethnographic method to explore my experience of being a PGTA employed at a research-intensive Russell Group university. In this, vignettes were developed to convey a selection of turning points in my professional development. Through these, I was able to convey the role of the blended professional working in third space and to describe