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Nourishing Wholehearted Faculty Professional Living Through Co-creative Play

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Abstract:

This study explores the value of co-creative play spaces for faculty professional learning and development. Data are drawn from the researchers' co-authored publications, which utilized arts-inspired data generation modes. The pluralist methodological route and analysis result in professional learning design elements captured through rich pictures, poetry, and dialogue. Resonances are shown between what has emerged from polyvocal self-study design elements and Brown's (2010) guideposts for wholehearted living. Implications for faculty wholehearted professional living are offered.

***Keywords:** co-creativity, faculty professional development, higher education, polyvocality, rich pictures, self-study research, wholehearted living*

Setting the Scene: Playful Polyvocal Self-Study

Self-study methodology developed from pioneering work in the early 1990s when a collective of teacher educators initiated the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) special interest group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Ever since, the field of self-study research and the global self-study research community have continued to strengthen and grow in new directions.

In choosing to do self-study research, teacher educators and other professionals opt to look critically and creatively at themselves to reimagine their own professional practice in the interests of others' wellbeing. Vital features of self-study methodology include critical collaborative inquiry, openness, reflection and reflexivity, transparent data analysis and process, and improvement-aimed exemplars that contribute to professional learning, ways of knowing, and knowledge generation (Barnes, 1998; LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011).

Self-study researchers use varied, often multiple methods, with the unique research questions driving the overall design (LaBoskey, 2004; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Samaras, 2011). The inherent flexibility in self-study methodology has inspired self-study researchers to devise new methods to study themselves and improve their practice (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020a; Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020; Whitehead, 2004). This methodological inventiveness has been motivated by the arts (Galman, 2009; Weber & Mitchell, 2004), participatory research (Mitchell, Moletsane, MacEntee, & de Lange, 2020), digital literacies and digital media (Garbett & Ovens, 2017), transdisciplinary professional learning communities (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020), and many other knowledge fields.

We are two teacher educators and self-study research methodologists who have collectively been playing with methods and data in self-study research since 2012. Living an ocean apart in our respective home countries of the United States of America (USA) and South Africa, we have been enriched professionally by our collective creativity and particularly by what we have come to recognize as playfulness in self-study research. We have collaborated with each other and other colleagues to support and guide communities of university faculty and graduate students interested in enacting self-study, using arts-inspired, digital, and transdisciplinary approaches. We share a passion for and strong commitment to mentoring newcomers to self-study research. With both of us having served as leaders of the AERA S-STEP SIG in the past decade, we have witnessed the exciting growth of the global self-study community of scholars.

As a dynamic element of our transcontinental scholarly collaboration, we have explored and developed innovative modes and designs to perform and write about self-study research (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020a). Digital technologies made possible new, virtual ways of thinking and tinkering with methods and data. Methodological inventiveness involved us in creating various inventive and hybrid approaches to best explore, represent, and communicate our research questions using multiple forms and formats. We reimagined what methods and data could be by letting go of what we thought they were supposed to be and combining techniques to make something new (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019, 2021; in press). We also invented new methods such as the virtual bricolage self-study method (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2017). Importantly, we were reminded that in self-study research,

professional knowledge is advanced by “playing with our ideas and sharing those ideas with colleagues, [through] muddying up our hands, making mistakes, and enjoying the process of learning and coming to know the world through our engagement in it” (Samaras, 2011, p. xiii).

During almost a decade of collaborative exploration, we recognized that many voices and stories matter for profound professional growth (Samaras et al., 2015). That, in turn, led us to conceptualize *polyvocal self-study research* (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020), making visible how dialogic encounters with varied ways of seeing and knowing can enrich self-study. By analyzing exemplars of polyvocal self-study research from the USA and South Africa, we have presented what we each have come to understand and practice through collaborating with others as *Paidiá: Design Elements for Polyvocal Self-Study in Transdisciplinary Higher Education Communities* (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2018, Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020). “Paidiá” is a Greek word, meaning children. Children’s wellbeing is fundamental to teacher educators who make every effort to enrich others’ learning through self-study. Additionally, Paidiá has associations with ‘play’ (Ifenthaler, Eseryel & Ge, 2012), signifying polyvocal self-study’s playful nature.

Paidiá is also an acronym, with each letter representing one of our design elements, as shown in Figure 1 (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020, pp. 1313-1316).

Personal Situated Chosen Inquiry

Participants choose to join in and select their inquiries situated in their immediate personal-professional contexts and broader socio-cultural-historical-political contexts.

Accountability

Accountability begins with participants reconsidering their professional practice with input and support from critical friends to build self-regulated, authentic professional learning.

Integrated Critical Creative Collaboration

Central to polyvocality are ongoing, intellectually safe, dialogic collaborative structures for reciprocal mentoring to recognize and value co-flexivity (collective reflexivity) and co-creativity. Co-designed platforms promote generative engagement with participants' contributions, enriching each other's learning and that of the community.

Design ↔ Dissemination

Participants share phases of their research as work in progress and make it public through presentations, writing, and other forms of dissemination, noting a transparent research design that clearly and accurately documents the unfolding research process and incorporates ongoing peer dialogue and critique.

Improved Learning for Self and Others

A polyvocal learning process entails critical and collaborative deep questioning of practice and the status quo to improve and impact learning for participants, critical friends, and significant others and contribute knowledge to professional scholarly communities.

Authenticated and Invited Polyvocal Leadership

Facilitators authenticate self-study research by practicing it in transdisciplinary learning communities. They also invite polyvocal leadership by encouraging participants to contribute their diverse expertise and experiences.

Figure 1: Paidiá: Design Elements for Polyvocal Self-Study

We are drawn towards the work of Brené Brown (2010) and her guideposts for “wholehearted living.” We see vital points of connections between those guideposts and our Paidiá design elements. In particular, we see resonances between what has emerged from our repeated explorations of polyvocal self-study and Brown’s emphasis on “Cultivating Creativity,” “Cultivating Play,” and “Letting Go of the Need for Certainty.”

In responding to the *Educational Forum*’s theme issue call, “How do we cultivate wholehearted teaching and learning in our schools and classrooms?” we wondered what wholehearted learning might look like for higher education faculty if they gave themselves permission to play together. We specifically considered what we might discover as critical components of our playful polyvocal self-study that might be useful for other faculty’s professional learning. In this exploration, we asked, “What design elements for playful faculty professional learning have we experienced in our polyvocal self-study?”

In this article, we begin by considering the value of play for children as well as for adults. We wonder what might happen if play could be a part of professional development in higher education and what that might look like. Then we consider how play has taken place for us in our

co-authored publications where we used arts-inspired modes of data generation. We take the reader along with our diverse and pluralist methodological route and analysis, which results in our presentation of design elements for playful professional learning captured in rich pictures, poetry, and dialogue. We close the article with a discussion of how we see our work connecting to Brown's guideposts for wholehearted living and the implications for faculty professional learning and development.

Appreciating the Intrinsic Value of Play

Play is a natural human instinct. We can easily observe the need and value for play in children, yet less so for adults and seldom in the academy. Play is a biological, psychological, and social necessity and essential to individuals and communities' healthy development and wellbeing. Play is a freely chosen process, personally directed and intrinsically motivated, and that applies to children and adults.

There has been much written about the value of play for young children's development (e.g., Bredekamp, 2017; Fein, 1979; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Children choose to play and are motivated to learn about the world through play, even though, and perhaps especially because it is filled with uncertainty and vulnerability. Dewey (1959) insisted that children needed playful experimentation to learn. However, a move towards school efficiency, standards, and a search for excellence pushed children and adults away from inventing and creating and progressive pedagogy (Goldstein, 2014).

Attention has also been given to the nature and benefits of play for adults with playful tools and strategies, including a magic circle, “where the rules of the real world do not directly apply (Whitton, 2018, p. 3) and even a Playful Learning Conference that began in 2016. Walsh (2018) argues that we need a playful frame that is accepted in higher education or “giving permission to play” (p. 333) because “stepping into the ‘magic circle’ of play has great benefit for deeper and more critical interaction with subject material. Play allows learners to make mistakes, often repeatedly, within being penalized” (p. 331). Like children, adults can benefit from playful experimentation to learn.

Bringing Play into Higher Education

Much of the literature related to play and creativity in higher education is focused on its value for students (Frick & Brodin, 2020) and the need to teach more creatively with universities “making room for creativity” for students (Livingston, 2010, p. 59). Nørgård et al. (2017) make this point: “While there is a vast literature on the benefits and pedagogies of play in childhood, research into playful learning in adulthood is limited, although there is evidence of the importance of adult play” (p. 274). Play can be found in visual studies and creative writing centers (e.g., Archer & Kelen, 2015). We argue that play would also be useful for other disciplines and faculty and not practiced alone but in collegial circles of co-creative play. We have experienced that playing together holds much potential for faculty professional learning and development.

We have also found that our playful collaborative work in higher education has returned us to places and spaces to progress and grow professionally and collaboratively. Similar to what

Parten (1932) identified as collaborative play, an advanced stage of play for young children, collaborative play as academics makes us fuller because of each other. We have experienced what John-Steiner (2000), a Vygotskian scholar (1978), calls “complementarity” (p. 7), whereby we support and trust each other’s “willingness to take risks in creative endeavors, a process considered critical by many researchers in creativity” (p. 79). As John-Steiner explains, when we share the risk, we are encouraged to take more risks, and we enter in an “emotional zone of proximal development...with a mutuality and growth in emotional and intellectual domains” (p. 145). So what does that look and feel like for us?

Our Unfolding and Uncharted Methodological Route

As indicated in our Paidiá design element, “Integrated Critical Creative Collaboration,” co-creativity (collective creativity) is central to our polyvocal self-study approach. We have consistently exemplified co-creativity by playing with arts-inspired modes of data generation, representation, and analysis. To begin this collaborative self-study, we looked back at our portfolio of 18 co-authored publications from 2014 to 2020. We found seven publications that were most relevant to exploring our research question: “What design elements for playful faculty professional learning have we experienced in our polyvocal self-study?” Our co-authored publications include playing with:

- the literary arts-inspired modes of dialogue and poetry (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2021);
- tapestry poetry (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, in press);

- memory-work through exchanging oral and written memory pieces (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020b);
- poetic bricolage with tanka poetry (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019);
- letter-writing, the co-creation of two online mood boards, photographs, and poetry (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2017);
- rich pictures, poetry, vocal performance, dialogue, and dance (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016);
- and multiperspective, multiverse, transcontinental dialogue, and poetry (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2015).

Once again, the methodological route that unfolded for this study was full of rich, co-creative play. Because of our familiarity with arts-inspired research practices, it has become almost instinctive for us to begin a new inquiry by playing with elements of the arts. To move our current exploration forward, we chose to start our study by reviewing our co-authoring publications. We then individually created rich pictures to illustrate design elements for playful faculty professional learning that we found embedded in our work. Rich pictures are a visual brainstorming mode that involves drawing detailed images to generate new ways of considering an issue or question from various viewpoints (Checkland, 2000). While rich pictures were developed for use in soft systems methodology (Checkland, 2000), we have found them a beneficial tool for co-creative meaning-making in collaborative self-study research (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016).

We decided to each create a rich picture and then to share and respond to these, following prompts adapted from Samaras and Freese (2006, pp. 75-76):

- Take time to examine each other's rich pictures. On a visual plane, what is most obvious to you?
- Have a discussion about what you each notice.
- Actively listen to your colleague.

We emailed our rich pictures (see Figures 2 and 3) to each other and then met virtually to discuss them. Our 90-minute online conversation was recorded and attended by a graduate student assistant who took notes and offered feedback. The recording was transcribed by the graduate student assistant, using transcription software.

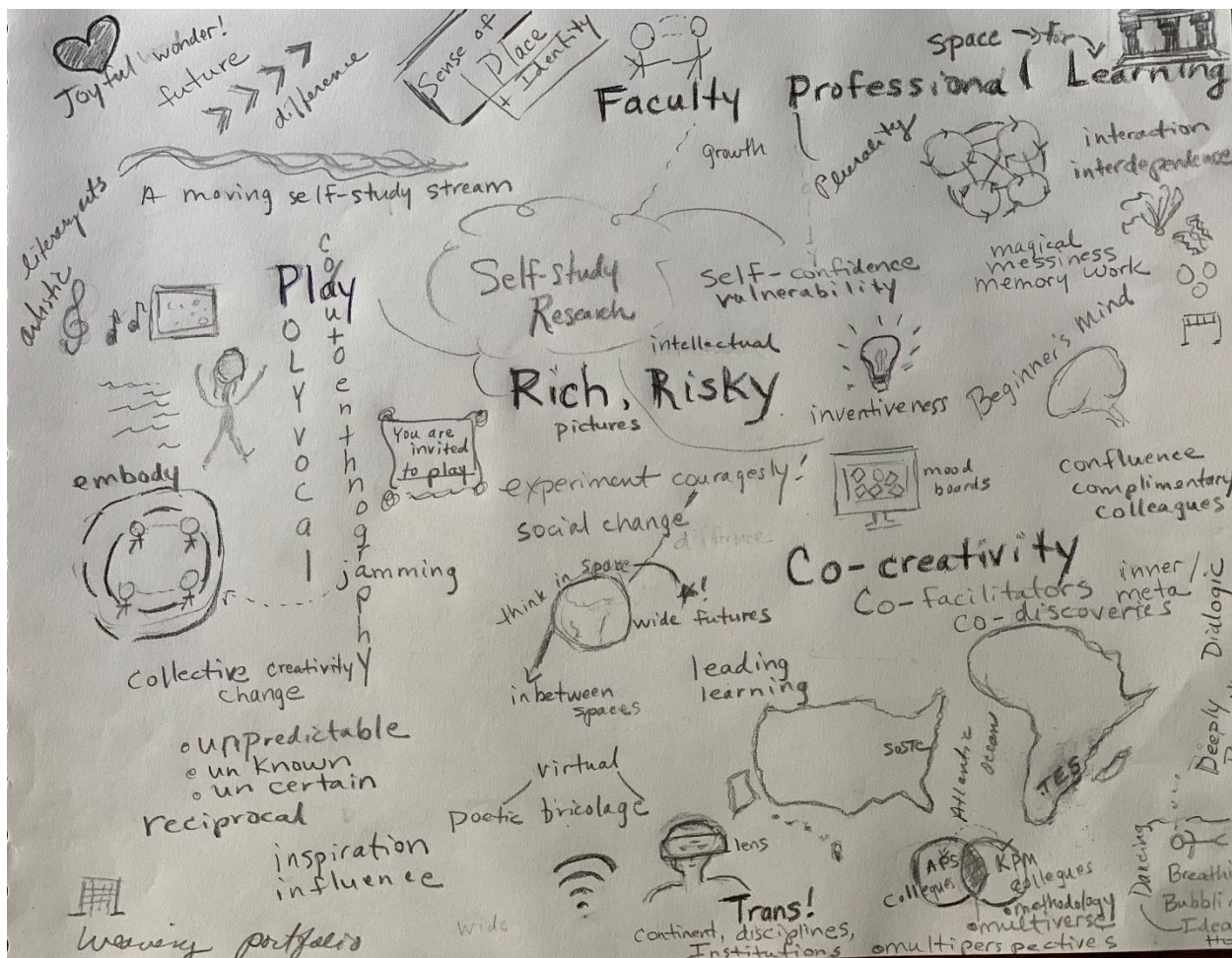


Figure 2: Anastasia's Rich Picture

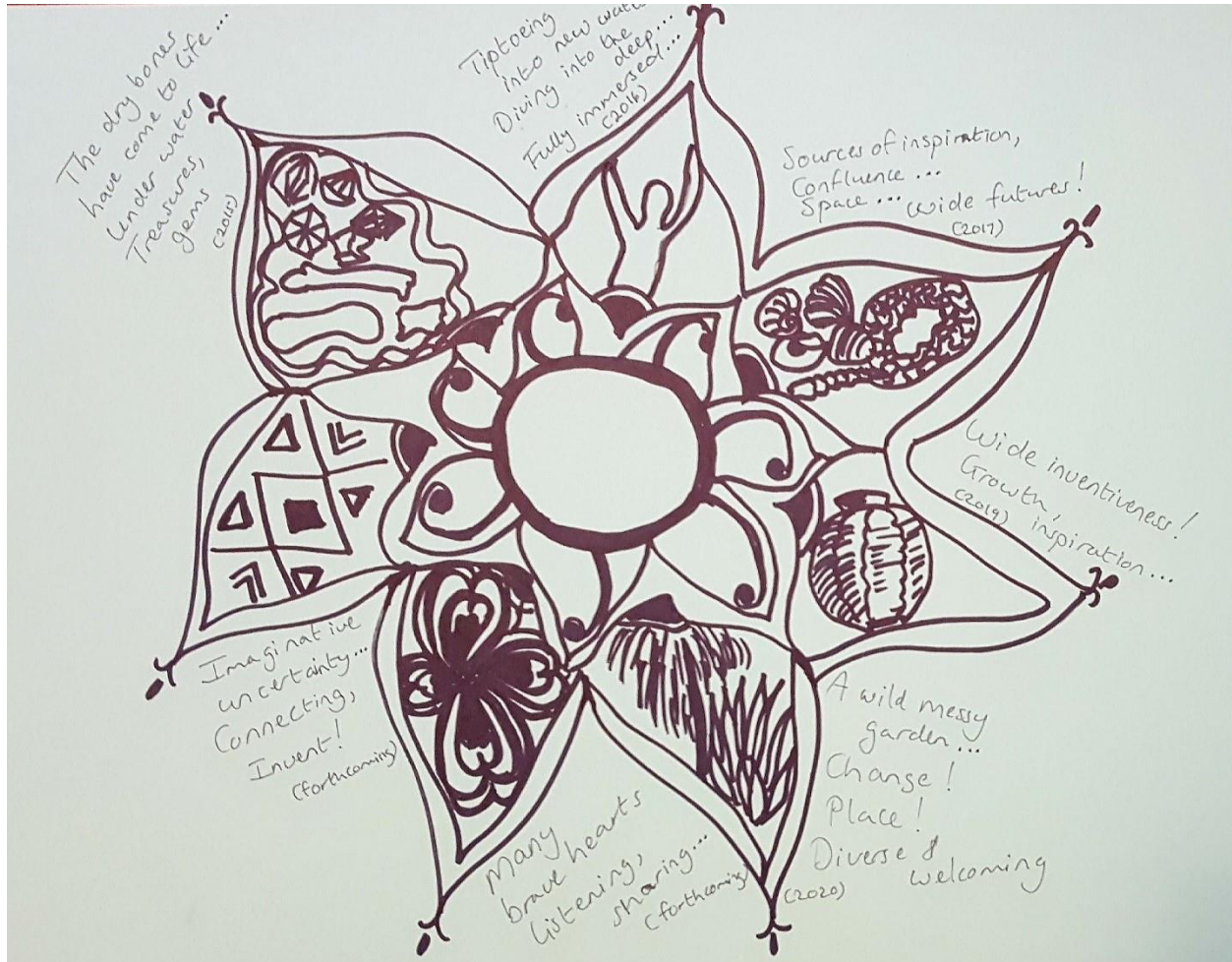


Figure 3: Kathleen's Rich Picture

After the virtual discussion of our rich pictures, we each spent time reading the transcript of our conversation. We worked individually, highlighting sections and indicating words and phrases that resonated with our research question. Anastasia conducted her analysis using tracking and comments in the actual transcript coding for comments related to playful professional learning. Kathleen employed an online vocabulary visualization tool, Word Sift (<http://wordsift.org>), using selected extracts from the transcript, where she identified nine prominent words. Then, we shared our coding with each other via email. Anastasia then returned to her tracked file and examined for wording aligned with Kathleen's words while also scanning

for different keywords. Similar codes were collapsed and sent to Kathleen for review and negotiation. For example:

Choice: choose; inspiration, motivating, free thought/fluidity; inviting others in the process with play props; give participants a form to invent something that's theirs

Together: together, complementary, confluence, interdependence, interaction, collaboration, reciprocal learning, connecting, open non-judging, supportive

Our next step was to move to represent our combined reading of the transcript through found poetry. As Butler-Kisber (2005) described, “found poetry is an approach that distills words from transcripts and transforms them into poetic form to evoke feelings and different kinds of understanding” (p. 108). Our poetic work feeds into scholarly conversations with other self-study researchers who have used artistic, metaphoric, and rhythmic poetry traits to enhance professional learning and practice (see, e.g., Grimmett, 2016; Hopper & Sanford, 2008; Johri, 2015).

For each stanza of our free-form poem, we began with a keyword from our combined reading. Then, we composed the rest of the stanza to respond to that keyword, using words and phrases we had coded and highlighted in the transcript. In this way, we created an eight-stanza poem. Our free-form poem served as research poetry (Langer & Furman, 2004). We created our poem to condense research data (excerpts from the transcript) and offer a shared representation of our subjective responses to the research question: “What design elements for playful faculty professional learning have we experienced in our polyvocal self-study?”

Choice...

Real play is a choice

So, we choose to step outside

Welcoming others

Space...

An inviting environment

Moving out of the familiar

Freedom to dance

Uncertainty...

Opening to uncertainty

Vulnerability and not knowing

No one is in charge

Cultural...

Bringing in rich cultural heritages

Weaving indigenous resources

In global conversations

Different...

Different styles, voices

Complementing each other

Connecting many hearts

Together...

Puzzle pieces that fit together

To create a richer picture

Expanding our learning

Change...

Creating a new composition

Pushing against the status quo

Changing what's normal

Academic...

Curiosity and vigor

Not bound by the rules

See the impact

Our Discoveries Concerning Design Elements for Playful Faculty Professional Learning

Through the poem, we became more conscious of specific characteristics of design elements for playful faculty professional learning. We saw how each stanza could serve as an evocative entry point for further exploration and consideration by us and others who wish to support wholehearted faculty professional learning. We each returned to our data to note pieces

of our online conversation that exemplified the connections expressed in the poem. Then, working to further document those connections, we pulled significant statements found in the transcript of the conversation about our rich pictures. In what follows, each stanza of our poem is extended by an exchange between our voices. The dialogue pieces are excerpts from the transcript, lightly edited for flow and coherence.

Choice...

Real play is a choice

So, we choose to step outside

Welcoming others

Anastasia: Play isn't another assignment, and real play is a free choice – just going out and not worrying about anything or having an agenda, per se, and just letting it, letting yourself, enjoy the process and the collaboration of it, which was a piece that you really brought to me. And there is the welcoming into play. We say, "In this place, you're welcome. You can be whatever you want to be here."

Kathleen: Our work together doesn't feel like work. And if I can choose what to do with my day, I will always choose our work because it's exciting and I'm going to learn something new.

Space...

An inviting environment

Moving out of the familiar

Freedom to dance

Kathleen: In both our pictures, there's a sense of open spaces: the flowing river, the weeping willow, and shells from the beach. So, a sense of moving out of your familiar workspace. You may not be able to take a trip to the beach, but often, moving to a different space can facilitate playfulness.

Anastasia: The images show how our work brings new light, like the Japanese lantern and the light bulb, in ways that say, "Look at the impact of what happens when you get out of your familiar element." "Look what it can do for you and for your students and for your colleagues." It's because we know that going into those spaces gives us the freedom to think in ways that we don't think of in our pencil and paper performance.

Uncertainty...

Opening to uncertainty

Vulnerability and not knowing

No one is in charge

Anastasia: We talked earlier about the trust and the vulnerability and the uncertainty we were okay with. And so there's that we can share. This is what really helped us to grow. In our relationship, we weren't judging. We were okay with not knowing how it was going to turn out.

Kathleen: It's like the improvisation in jazz. One musician riffs off another, and suddenly you have a new composition. But you've got to be open to that process and to experiencing uncertainty with others.

Cultural...

Bringing in rich cultural heritages

Weaving indigenous resources

In global conversations

Kathleen: Our participants bring so many different kinds of cultural resources. The playful learning welcomes our cultural backgrounds. And weaves together indigenous resources and global resources.

Anastasia: That's a good point. Because really what does enrich it is what each person brings into the play experience. It's honoring what the participants can bring into that situation.

Different...

Different styles, voices

Complementing each other

Connecting many hearts

Anastasia: You really captured many things that I hadn't thought about because I just let it flow. And I think that when I looked at your picture when it first came in the email, I was like, "Wow, we approached this so very differently!" But then not, you know?

Kathleen: I think our different styles complement each other. As you said, we picked up many similar ideas but presented them differently. We've noticed before how our diverse backgrounds and different experiences come together to create a richer picture. Our differences interactively speak to each other.

Together...

Puzzle pieces that fit together

To create a richer picture

Expanding our learning

Kathleen: I really liked how you presented Africa and North America in your drawing in a way that looks like puzzle pieces that fit together. So, although they are separate in one way, there's a confluence between them.

Anastasia: I thought about that in our work together. Sometimes I am like the free-flowing dancing and going from this little picture to this little picture in this one, and then you have this wonderful way when we write to give us the frame that still contains all of the fluidity.

Change...

Creating a new composition

Pushing against the status quo

Changing what's normal

Anastasia: I'm grateful that in developing my signature research work, I followed what I thought was cutting edge and, yes, risky but rich, as we like to say. And I want to encourage my doctoral students to do that. To not be afraid to lead the way rather than replicate.

Kathleen: I have seen over the years how, because of our collaboration, my teaching has changed and grown. There are things, like dancing, that I might have been maybe a little shy to do with adult students in the beginning. Now, it's one of the first things we do, and it completely changes the dynamic of the teaching.

Academic...

Curiosity and vigor

Not bound by the rules

See the impact

Kathleen: I remember how, at a poetic inquiry conference, someone performed a poem about *rigor* in academia as *rigor mortis*! And that made me think about using another word that might be more inviting, such as vigor. So, I ask, what about the vigor, the energy, the potency?

Anastasia: We've pushed against the nomenclature of what people think of when they think of research. We are not being bound by the rules of what this should look like, and on the other hand, we're very keen to make sure we frame it within perspectives and transparent methods. We're very scholarly in both our data collection and our analysis. So it's all there. But it's very

different from the way that maybe we've been told it should look like. It is the avenue of really reaching into the soul of who we are and what we're doing, and what kind of impact we're having.

Connecting to Brown's Guideposts for Wholehearted Living

Inspired by Brown's (2010) guideposts for wholehearted living, this study explored the design elements for faculty playful professional learning. We asked, "What design elements for playful faculty professional learning have we experienced in our polyvocal self-study?" Starting with a sense of open questioning, this new play space allowed us to consider what our co-creative play has involved as we looked back at our co-authored arts-inspired self-study work. It afforded us yet another playful adventure that we chose to enter together, with the uncertainty we have embraced as colleagues for a decade now.

We brought together our ideas for playing with data. Our understanding evolved through a process of creative interaction. We shared our different viewpoints through rich pictures, dialogue, and found poetry, which led to our discovery of what playful faculty professional learning has entailed. These discoveries give a sense of orientation and direction to our practice of facilitating faculty professional learning and development. We see our findings as experiential wisdom that is informed by experience and informs practice. But, keeping in mind Brown's guidepost of "Letting Go of the Need for Certainty," we remember to hold this understanding lightly and be prepared to let it go if it is no longer useful.

We particularly noticed how our critical collaborative inquiries have expanded our professional development and our work with colleagues. Playful rich co-creativity in our work is central to the Paidia design elements and connects to Brown's emphasis on "Cultivating Creativity" and "Cultivating Play." Our co-creativity has been a sanctioning of collaborative play. This shared play enables us to live more creatively and imaginatively, and it is contagious and welcoming to our colleagues and us. The playful techniques become instruments of intuition and spontaneity as we move into the unknown. There is a necessary imperfection in what we produce, which feeds into the ongoing process of learning and teaching. There is no definitive endpoint – it is a constant endeavor. We move to complete a task to then take the next step forward to an unknown destination.

Our conversations about choice remind us that we get to choose data and differences in research. We found that we advance our work in self-study research, as Brown emphasizes, when we are not always in control, nor should we be. Self-study practice requires us to engage in the world of lived relationships, a world that we have no control over. We learn most when we allow ourselves to dwell in the questioning, with no guarantee or certainty of the outcome, but with trust and confidence in the co-creative process. So much of the wonder in our work has been embracing the uncertainty of its consequences. One might argue that uncertainty is the essence, and at the center of being a researcher. This aligns with Browns' "Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith and "Letting Go of the Need for Certainty."

Implications: Wholehearted Faculty Professional Living

Our work extends beyond scholarly production to our very wellbeing and self-compassion and is connected to Brown's "Cultivating Self-Compassion and Letting Go of Perfectionism." It is freeing to let go of self-doubt and cultivate laughter, song, and dance instead. Giving ourselves permission for professional play reminds us of Brown's work of the importance of letting go of what you think you are supposed to do or be as academics and what other people think. For this to be possible, it is vital to have support from and give support to like-minded people and within institutions willing to support such innovations. A sense of community and a culture for co-creative play are essential for faculty professional development. Thus, we see a fuller view of faculty professional play embedded with what we now understand as *wholehearted professional living*. Brown's work has inspired us to make those connections for ourselves and others involved in faculty professional development seeking to advance the field in new ways.

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