"Risky, Rich Co-Creativity"
Weaving a Tapestry of Polyvocal Collective Creativity in Collaborative Self-Study

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Abstract

We are teacher educators who facilitate transdisciplinary self-study research in our home countries of South Africa and the United States of America. We have worked individually and with others to guide communities of university educators and graduate students interested in self-study research. We understand this transdisciplinary, transnational, and transcultural work as *polyvocal professional learning.* Central to our work has been cultivating *co-creativity* (collective creativity). This chapter provides an overview of co-creativity in collaborative self-study practice and scholarship. Then we step back to explore and express through tapestry poetry and dialogue what we have learned along the way about polyvocal co-creativity in collaborative self-study. We demonstrate our self-study process to serve as an exemplar and consider what our work offers to others. The chapter shows how creative engagement in the company of diverse others can generate new ways of knowing self, with broader implications for educational and social change. Polyvocal co-creativity allows us to see others, our work, and ourselves in ways we could not see otherwise. As we collectively take the risk of exploring innovative methods, we can expand the possibilities for more fruitful learning and change the status quo for professional knowledge and practice globally.

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We are teacher educators involved in facilitating and teaching transdisciplinary self-study research in South Africa and the United States of America. We have worked individually and collaborated with others to support and guide communities of university educators and graduate students interested in learning and enacting self-study research as their collective task, regardless of their professional practice. Having both served as chairs of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices [S-STEP], a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), has allowed us to experience and be close witnesses to the collective creativity of the global self-study community of scholars. Our collaborations with self-study colleagues have supported and extended our research. In turn, we each have a deep passion and strong commitment to mentoring newcomers to self-study research.

Working with colleagues and students from various disciplines and professions, we recognized that our collaboration was also valuable to those outside the teaching profession. Those experiences led us to purposefully enact and study collaborations beyond our network of teacher educators. We conceptualized our transdisciplinary, transnational, and transcultural network with interactions and reciprocal learning as *polyvocal professional learning* (Pithouse Morgan & Samaras, 2015; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2018). We co-constructed design elements of facilitating polyvocal professional learning communities in what we have called Paidiá. The elements emerged from the collaborative self-study of our repeated explorations of polyvocal professional learning in transdisciplinary higher education. They are informed by a strong theoretical and conceptual base (see Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020 for exemplars enacted and validated in practice).

Central to our work in facilitating transdisciplinary professional learning communities has been cultivating "ongoing, intellectually safe, dialogic collaborative structures for reciprocal mentoring to recognize and value co-flexivity (collective reflexivity) and co-creativity (collective creativity)" (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2018, p. 251). Our conceptualization of polyvocality made visible how dialogic encounters with diverse ways of seeing, knowing, and doing can generate new insights for self-study researchers.

We learned that participants are motivated to be co-creative when articulating their passion with a self-study research question. Our work supports and helps them refine their question and invites them into new ways of exploring it. We have also found that innovations are prompted by working with trustworthy colleagues and especially across disciplines to experience a widening of perspectives. Trust is built slowly in non-hegemonic groups with accountability and reciprocal mentorship. Facilitators lead from the inside as they work

within the group conducting their self-studies along with participants. In polyvocal professional learning communities, many voices matter as participants' voices "weave in and out of and harmonize with each other and yet remain independent" (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018, p. 324).

Polyvocality can simply be understood as 'multiple voices.' But, in conceptualizing *polyvocal self-study*, we drew on Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) detailed analysis of polyvocality (which he discussed as polyphony) as a narrative approach in the novels of Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky interwove a tapestry of diverse voices and viewpoints in his fiction. Bakhtin described this polyvocality as:

> A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices . . . with equal rights and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (p. 6)

In our interpretation of Bakhtin's (1984) study of polyphonic literary expression, we recognized three characteristics of polyvocality that are noteworthy for self-study communities. These are (a) *plurality*, in which "the boundaries of a single voice [are] exceeded" (p. 22); (b) *interaction and interdependence* between "various consciousnesses" (italics added, p. 36); and (c) *creative activity* (italics added, p. 97) through polyvocality as "an artistic method" (p. 69) and as "artistic thinking" (p. 270). The research presented in this chapter exemplifies *collective creative activity* within our international network of self-study colleagues.

We begin with a brief overview of collective creativity in collaborative self-study practice and scholarship. Then, we step back to explore and express through poetry and dialogue what we have learned along the way about polyvocal collective creativity in collaborative self-study. Informed by Mishler's (1990) model of trustworthiness in inquiry-guided research, we demonstrate our self-study process to serve as an exemplar. To close, we consider what our work offers to others.

Collective Creativity in Collaborative Self-Study

Self-study methodology is characterized by particular traits. These include critical collaborative inquiry, openness, reflection and reflexivity, transparent data analysis and process, and improvement-aimed exemplars of professional learning, ways of knowing, and knowledge generation (Barnes, 1998; LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). While all self-study research should have some collaborative or interactive elements, there is a distinctive body of *collaborative self-study* scholarship in which "two or more people intentionally [work] together as 'co-scholars'" to explore a shared self-study research question or topic (Pithouse et al., 2009, p. 27). And, as Pithouse et al. (2009) emphasize, "more and more, [self-study] scholars ... are making the 'what,' 'how,' and 'why,' of this scholarly collaboration the focus of joint self-study research" (p. 29). Likewise, in this chapter, we focus on understanding the polyvocal collective creativity or *co-creativity* (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018a) that is at the center of our collaborative self-study. We pause to look back over our portfolio of co-authored self-study scholarship to ask, *"How can we deepen our understanding of polyvocal co-creativity in collaborative self-study research?"*

Our enactments of co-creativity have taken place against a backdrop of a rich history of shared methodological inventiveness in the international self-study community (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020; Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020; Whitehead, 2004). Since the S-STEP special interest group's founding, self-study researchers in teacher education have worked together to play with a multiplicity of innovative forms and processes. These inventive modes and methods have been inspired by diverse knowledge fields including the visual, literary, and performing arts (Galman, 2009; Weber & Mitchell, 2002; Weber & Mitchell, 2004), popular culture (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), and digital literacies and digital media (Garbett & Ovens 2017). Co-creativity has been a distinguishing feature of much of the collaborative self-study scholarship of teacher educators working as duos and trios. To illustrate, Weber and Mitchell (2002) jointly performed their research, Hamilton and Pinnegar (2006) collaboratively explored possibilities through collage making, Tidwell and Manke (2009) made meaning together through metaphor drawing, and Berry et al. (2015) created dialogues for meaning-making. Co-creativity has also characterized the scholarship of larger groups of teacher educators. For example, Makaiau et al. (2019) explored fiction as a literary arts-based research mode in self-study.

Over the last decade, while we have enacted and studied the impact of collaborative self-study for faculty professional development, we have also explored our role in facilitating it. Our work in leading and supporting polyvocal co-creativity has taken place at our individual universities (e.g., Masinga et al., 2016; Samaras et al., 2014a), across our universities (Samaras et al., 2015), as well as with self-study colleagues outside our home institutions (e.g., Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018a; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015). Within those professional learning communities, we have examined how the exchanging of ideas in creative formats prompts individuals to reimagine their pedagogies (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018b; Samaras et al., 2014b). Moreover, as Smith et al. (2018) found: "Through such meditations, participants articulated a reconfigured professional and personal identity, hinged not on an expertise honed in competition but on a shared openness and vulnerability" (p. 291).

We have been involved in diverse forms of exploring creative activity with fellow teacher educators and in transdisciplinary groups with faculty from various disciplines. These are exemplified in published pieces containing diverse creative genres, including:

- collage (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018a);
- dance (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016);
- dialogue (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015);
- drawing (Van Laren et al., 2014);
- mood boards (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2017);
- narratives, research artifacts, and sketches (Samaras et al., 2014a; Samaras et al., 2019);
- poetry and poetic performances (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Samaras et al., 2015);
- play scripts and dramaturgical analysis (Meskin et al., 2017);
- readers' theater (Van Laren et al., 2019);
- vignettes (Hiralaal et al., 2018);
- visual exegesis of a painting (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018b);
- visually rich digital work (Smith et al., 2018); and
- working with objects (Dhlula-Moruri et al., 2017).

The work in self-study groups has also included graduate students. They have used the visual and literary arts as a mediating tool, individually and then collectively as a learning community of emerging self-study scholars (Johri, 2015; Madondo et al., 2019; Mittapalli & Samaras, 2008; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019; Racines & Samaras, 2015; Samaras, 2008; Woitek, 2020).

As self-study community facilitators, we see ourselves creating professional frames for individuals, including ourselves, to weave tapestries, shaping, informing, and transforming into a collective one. Thus we chose to share an anthology of our joint creativity using a tapestry poem format, which zigzags our thinking, playing with ideas, and making something new together (Sawyer, 2013).

A Poetic Tapestry of Polyvocal Co-Creativity

Forms and processes of the visual, performing, and literary arts have enabled much of our collaborative self-study work. For this chapter, we used the literary arts-inspired mode of found poetry as a starting point to explore polyvocal co-creativity. We are building on our portfolio of poetic self-study scholarship (e.g., Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2017; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019; Samaras et al., 2015). Our work also feeds into scholarly conversations with other self-study researchers who have used the artistic, metaphoric, and rhythmic qualities of poetry to enhance professional learning and practice (see Grimmett, 2016; Hopper & Sanford, 2008; Johri, 2015).

Found poetry is a method that gathers words from written texts and arranges them into poetic form (Butler-Kisber, 2005). To source material for our found poetry, we looked back over our published work in which we had conceptualized and exemplified polyvocal co-creativity in self-study. We selected six of our recent co-authored publications that spoke to the focus and purpose of this chapter (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020a; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020b; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2018; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020). We then chose relevant excerpts from the six selected publications as raw material for creating found poetry.

We arranged the found poetry using the innovative tapestry poem design, which is a form of collaborative, transcontinental poetry developed by Avril Meallem in Israel and Shernaz Wadia in India (Meallem & Wadia, 2018). To create our tapestry poem, we followed Meallam's and Wadia's guidelines. In summary, their instructions are as follows: *using email to communicate, two poets interweave together the multicolored threads of two independently composed nine-line poems – one from each of them on a title selected by one of them – into a composite 18-line poem.*

To begin, Kathleen created a nine-line found poem. She emailed her poem's title to Anastasia, who then composed her nine-line poem inspired by Kathleen's title. Kathleen and Anastasia then read each other's poems. Next, Anastasia wove all 18 lines into one composition and emailed it to Kathleen. Lastly, Kathleen suggested a change to the title based on the 18-line tapestry poem's final line.

Although we have often composed found poetry together using various poetic forms, tapestry poetry was a new co-creative adventure. We found that it worked quite seamlessly. The clear guidelines offered by Meallem and Wadia allowed for this fluid process. Our years of

experience in creating poetry together via email, mutual trust, and shared ability to relax into co-creative processes were added enabling factors.

Through composing our tapestry poem, "Risky, Rich Co-Creativity," we were able to make visible and available our fluid, dialogic "understanding in flow" of polyvocal co-creativity in collaborative self-study (Freeman, 2017, p. 86). We invite readers to experience "the felt space" of our poetic thinking (Freeman, 2017, p. 73).

Risky, Rich Co-Creativity: A Tapestry Poem

We put on our imaginative lenses
To see more critically
Knowing this artful pathway
Stirs a deep uncertainty
And promises tension and risk

There is a gravitation toward
A collective discovery
For triggering ideas
For connecting with others
Transdisciplinary

We listen and relax
We enact and invent
With reciprocal mentoring
More than collaboration
Risky, rich co-creativity

A Transcontinental Tapestry Dialogue on Polyvocal Co-Creativity

Our tapestry poem served as a research poem (Langer & Furman, 2004) to condense research data (excerpts from the six selected publications) and offer a combined representation of our subjective responses. As we composed the tapestry poem, we saw how each stanza could serve as an entry point for dialogic meaning-making (Freeman, 2017).

In many of the polyvocal self-study pieces we have co-authored with university faculty from South Africa and the USA, we have used dialogue as a literary arts-inspired mode to explore and communicate our collective creative endeavors. In the literary arts, dialogue can allow readers to empathize with the characters in a story and witness interpersonal character development (Coulter & Smith, 2009). Correspondingly, self-study researchers have used dialogue to engage readers and represent professional learning through conversations with trusted peers (see Bullock & Sator, 2018; Martin et al., 2020). Building on this, in response to the tapestry poem, we created a new dialogue by combining excerpts from our collaborative creative work with colleagues from seven of our published pieces (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018; Samaras et al., 2014a; Samaras et al., 2014b; Samaras et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018), lightly edited for flow and coherence.

In what follows, each stanza of our tapestry poem is extended by an exchange between our voices and the distinctive voices of colleagues who teach and research on different continents,

in varied contexts, and across diverse professional and academic domains. By bringing together the poem and dialogue, we became more conscious of co-creativity's specific contributions to collaborative self-study research. Using each stanza and the accompanying dialogue as an interpretive stimulus, we discuss these contributions for our further exploration and for consideration by other collaborative self-study researchers.

We put on our imaginative lenses
To see more critically
Knowing this artful pathway
Stirs a deep uncertainty
And promises tension and risk

Lynne Scott Constantine: Our interest was in getting ourselves and other academics outside of the predominant ways of thinking, learning and communicating that academics are trained in: the word, the book, and cerebration.

Theresa Chisanga: For me, in the beginning, I was just feeling completely lost. I was wondering, "But what's going on here?"

Seth Hudson: It was a shock to the system; I was forced to think without words. That was a breakthrough.

Laura Lukes: You have to be open to the process and not necessarily understanding the process initially, and you have to be OK with that. So I think it kind of levels the playing field a little bit, where people have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Star Muir: The beginner's eye is a particularly special place. We reach an area of greater density, reach conceptual difficulties, learn new ways of perceiving and expressing, and learning is hard, but it also offers new growth.

Laura Poms: It's about taking a risk and taking a chance and not worrying about whether you fail or not, but what you learned from the process.

E. Shelley Reid: I don't often get to be in a room where everybody else is talking about being out on the edge, and being risk-taking in that way. It made it easier for me to think about the work that I'm doing, all of which has entirely not gone according to plan.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: But, you shouldn't enter into it too lightly. You have to have a certain amount of …

Daisy Pillay: Courage …

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: And resilience.

Lorraine Singh: It seems to be light and effortless. Yet we know otherwise.

Daisy Pillay: For some people, maybe it's just too scary.

Anastasia P. Samaras: It's complex, isn't it? It is more than messy.

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: It was very humbling. I had genuine fearful moments.

Lynne Scott Constantine: You've got to be willing to be vulnerable and let it all hang out. You can't really learn, and you certainly can't find a path to self-improvement without being willing to just let the mess spill out there. Because then you can really see what it is.

Lesley Smith: It captures that idea of the impossible being possible, but also the capacity to enter a seemingly dangerous and alien environment and thrive there through letting go of preconceptions.

Delysia Timm: I have learned the importance of providing opportunities to explore areas where we are not necessarily comfortable to go because it is there where our true creativity is unleashed.

Discussion: As we step back and take stock of our work in polyvocal co-creativity, we acknowledge that collective creativity asks us as researchers to be open and trustful of one's capacity and that of our colleagues and students. It also requires a sense of vulnerability and risk to explore old questions with new methods and diverse voices. Embracing the uncertainties, complexities, and elisions of practice in the company of trusted others through unexplored means can lead to fruitful results, as collaborative self-study requires both courage and vulnerability (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Smith & Samaras, 2011).

> *There is a gravitation toward*
> *A collective discovery*
> *For triggering ideas*
> *For connecting with others*
> *Transdisciplinary*

E. Shelley Reid: When you're in a room pushing together, it's fabulously fun and turns my brain on.

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: I discovered that playing and scholarship can coexist.

Laura Lukes: People aren't looking for the right answer. They're looking for the right process.

Inbanathan Naicker: Yes. There's no blueprint. It takes on a life of its own and develops organically.

Chris de Beer: The whole process was emergent and messy; many of the decisions were made on the fly but slightly guided. There was a very slender thread that held it all together. And, I think at times, it was almost like we wanted more order but then abandoned ourselves to the process and, lo and behold, something manifested!

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: In so doing, each person enriches and contributes to the collective journey.

Relebohile Moletsane: Our multiple perspectives, debated and sometimes agreed upon and at other times diverging, have the potential to enable us to arrive at more "trustworthy" claims.

Daisy Pillay: I think that's what happens because each of us responds with our knowledge, and when we put it together, we produce different knowledges, and the way we come to produce it is changing as well.

Anastasia Samaras: Each participant brought their unique talents to our whole group, and collectively we changed. We worked in overlapping circles, using our expertise and talents to support each other's efforts. We found that we were a resource for each other because of our unique disciplinary lenses.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: As we bring our diverse disciplinary knowledges in, we offer ideas that we weren't all necessarily exposed to before.

Lee Scott: I also think we must never underestimate the teaching that we're doing. We are teaching each other. That's really important. And it's quite a natural way to learn as opposed to reading.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: And, because of our dynamic, creative collaboration, we keep learning and discovering.

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: It leads to making a much more growing, developing contribution towards knowledge.

Anastasia Samaras: The methodology centers all of us in a set of very diverse contexts that we bring to the table. If this methodology makes so much sense to a group of very different professions and is not limited to teaching, but includes theatre directing or lab work or whatever, it validates the methodology.

Lynne Scott Constantine: With the rich possibilities of self-study methodology in these multidisciplinary, risk-taking research communities, the data we are collecting, and the studies we are producing, are like images in a photomosaic, where individual images are fitted together to create a larger image that only emerges from the proper arrangement of the small originals.

Discussion: We have found that making time and space to be playful together is essential to the process of discovery and a powerful portal for mutual learning and innovation (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020a). Regular play dates remind us that teaching and learning is not a problem to be solved, but a human experience that can be enjoyed and continually reimagined. There is no guarantee or certainty of the outcome, but trust and confidence in the shared, dynamic process. New understandings and new ventures unfold in non-linear, sometimes almost inexplicable ways. Embracing play in our daily work involves re-encountering each other and ourselves spaciously and with a sense of possibilities and imaginative awareness, leading to improving practice.

We listen and relax
We enact and invent
With reciprocal mentoring

More than collaboration
Risky, rich co-creativity

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: Co-learning requires participants to listen to each other and accommodate various views of how each participant perceives learning to have occurred.

Delysia Timm: As we work and interact together over time, we can be co-creators of knowledge through caring and listening. We share ourselves as resources for each other.

Autum Casey: Part of it is just having that nurturing environment; when you sit in a room with people who have identified as wanting to do better, there's no chance you are going to say something, and they're going to be like, "Whhhat is she doing?"

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: What happens in our group makes me a lot more confident in being creative and thinking outside the usual. When you're able to discuss it with a group of like-minded people, then you can see that there is some merit in this idea that might be considered thoroughly "off the wall" by other people.

Delysia Timm: The journey happens with others, who are friends. So, it is a safe journey.

Lorraine Singh: There's a lot of healing that happens that way. You must be there with someone else. Because the breathing and energy that you release help the next person.

Anastasia Samaras: We started with thinking about "How do we go about it?" And then we ended up also talking more about *why* we do it.

Theresa Chisanga: For me, there was support and genuine cooperation with a community that encouraged and reminded me constantly that my role was critical and mattered. This way, I was more productive, and my job more meaningful.

Jill Nelson: And, I'm changing my teaching because of my experience with the process.

Lynne Scott Constantine: I was not in a repair shop at all, but rather in a place where my task as teacher of the arts and the humanities was not to tinker with the mechanics of classroom experience but to be a lifelong learner—to engage in self-transformation as a means of becoming an agent of change. It has emboldened me to seek transformation and be transformed to be a better vector for students' self-transformation.

Anastasia Samaras: I've just been continually enriched by my experiences in moving out of my lens. So that's been where I've been able to really grow and be inspired.

Delysia Timm: We co-learn. We change. Doors open, and we venture into new areas.

Daisy Pillay: And I think that changing what we do here is changing us as people.

Lorraine Singh: Yes. It's about improving your practice, and so, in doing that, you are changing the self. You change yourself so that the situation around you changes.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: And, witnessing others' growth and learning from and with them is restorative.

Discussion: The impact of giving ourselves permission to step outside the norm of research methods and to work collaboratively and creatively outside of our comfort zones with colleagues from other disciplines, institutions, and continents, has allowed us to grow professionally and advance the knowledge base of teaching and learning. We have recognized first-hand that crossing the threshold into collective creativity is not merely something nice to do. It has been vital to expressing ourselves and weaving a dialogue with colleagues in a commonality of purpose (Hawke, 2020). It has not only changed us, but it has given us entry into an alternative academic universe. Over years of polyvocal co-creative activity, we have come to see our practices, our networks, and ourselves as changing and fluid, full of possibility. Creative action across our transnational networks has advanced understandings and the impact of collaborative self-study in culturally relevant and pluralistic ways that echo the global self-study community's increasingly rich diversity.

Scholarly Significance

We share our tapestry as an invitation to others to consider designing polyvocal, co-creative spaces within their contexts for non-linear production and towards exciting, risky, abundant pathways for learning and professional development. We trust our work will offer encouragement to self-study scholars, whether beginners or more experienced, who might feel uncertain about collaborating with others to try new ways of doing things. Our creative partnerships with students and faculty across contexts and continents have validated our conviction that creativity is an intrinsic human quality that prompts innovations in practice. We have experienced how self-study researchers from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, who might not necessarily perceive themselves as creative, can gain confidence and insight through hands-on experience of playing with innovative forms and processes in safe spaces. There are outlets for such work, and our S-STEP community is continuously creating new ones.

In the warp and weft of our transcontinental tapestry dialogue, we see how imaginative engagement in the company of diverse others can produce new ways of knowing self, with broader implications for educational and social change. As Eisner (2002) reminds us, "Imagination gives us images of the possible that provide a platform for seeing the actual, and by seeing the actual freshly, we can do something about creating what lies beyond it (p. 4). Polyvocal co-creativity allows us to see others, our work, and ourselves in ways we could not see otherwise. As we collectively take the risk of exploring new methods, we are expanding the possibilities for more fruitful learning. Forming polyvocal co-creative spaces for collaborative self-study can contribute to changing the status quo for professional knowledge and practice on a global level.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all our colleagues for the kind permission to include their names and voices in the chapter.

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