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## Title

Polyvocal Poetic Play Through Self-Study Research: Challenging the Status Quo to Improve Professional Practice

## Abstract

In self-study research, numerous approaches are used, including collaboratively creative poetic inquiry. In this chapter, two teacher educators and self-study scholars consider how their *polyvocal poetic play* has helped challenge the status quo of method in researching professional knowledge and practice over the years. Looking specifically at their polyvocal poetic play within their larger corpus of the diverse self-study methods they enacted, a word cloud of frequently used words in publication titles made this work's central features visible. Juxtaposing their word cloud with two more that included others' poetic self-study scholarship allowed them to examine their work as a duo in the context of two decades of poetic self-study research. The words *bricolage*, *polyvocal*, *creativity*, *play*, *transdisciplinary*, *virtual*, and *place* are featured distinctively in the titles of their scholarship. The "why" and "so what?" of their poetic self-study were clarified by interweaving their thoughts prompted by these phrases to produce a double voice poem, followed by letter-writing. This chapter illuminates how co-creative self-study can grow possibilities for expansive learning, providing diverse epistemic options for bringing us to new understandings of professional activity and changing professional ways of knowing and being.

**Keywords:** Poetic inquiry, Self-study research, Co-creativity, Professional practice, Professional knowledge

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# Polyvocal Poetic Play Through Self-Study Research: Challenging the Status Quo to Improve Professional Practice

## Self-Study as a Research Methodology and Body of Scholarship

In the early 1990s, self-study became recognized as a distinct research methodology and body of scholarship (Loughran, 2004). It all started with teacher educators studying themselves in action in a personal situated inquiry to improve their professional practice, advance their professional understanding, and contribute to public debates about improving teacher education for the greater good (Samaras & Freese, 2009).

Self-study is distinguished from other methodologies for researching professional practice by its emphasis on the researcher's own self and experiences (Feldman et al., 2004). Teacher educators and other professionals use self-study research to examine themselves critically and creatively, reimagining their professional knowledge and practice in the interests of others' well-being. This challenging course of action necessitates self-awareness, openness, and candor. Critical collaborative inquiry, transparency, introspection and reflexivity, transparent data analysis and procedure, and improvement-focused exemplars are essential aspects of self-study leading to purposeful professional learning (LaBoskey, 2004; Pithouse et al., 2009; Samaras, 2011).

Professionals inside and outside of teacher education engage in self-study because it allows them to better understand themselves and the environments in which they work. This enables them to reassess their work and consider the consequences of their efforts in both specific and broader contexts. Practicing self-study creates a platform for educators' personal professional accountability while building teacher efficacy and agency (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Educators and other practitioners from various disciplines and professions are increasingly conducting self-studies to enhance shared human experience and shed light on pressing educational and social issues (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020; Taylor & Diamond, 2020). Arts-based self-study methods are beneficial for improving professional knowledge and practice and feature prominently in self-study scholarship and teaching (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2020; Weber & Mitchell, 2004).

## Putting Ourselves in the Arts-based Self-Study Research Frame

We are teacher educators who enable transdisciplinary self-study research within and beyond our home nations of South Africa and the United States of America. We lead communities of university faculty and graduate students engaged in self-study research, both individually and collectively. Observing the significance of multiple voices and stories for profound professional growth led us to conceptualize *polyvocal self-study* (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020).

The theoretical roots of our polyvocal self-study research are in Bakhtin's (1984) detailed study of polyvocality as a narrative method of interplaying diverse voices and perspectives in Dostoevsky's fiction (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020). Transdisciplinary and transcultural enactments of polyvocality – exemplified by “*plurality, interaction and interdependence, and creative activity*” (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019, p. 7) – offer collectively creative (co-creative) ways of performing and communicating self-study scholarship. And cultivating *co-creativity* is at the heart of our self-study research.

Self-study researchers use wide-ranging, often multiple methods, with research questions motivating the overall design (LaBoskey, 2004; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). The integral elasticity in self-study methodology has stimulated self-study scholars to invent new ways to study and advance their practice (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020b; Whitehead, 2004). They have drawn on the arts, digital literacies and media, participatory research, transdisciplinary professional learning communities, and many other knowledge fields. These methodologically inventive approaches offer a more diversified and innovative approach to studying professional knowledge and practice than standard methods. As a result, self-study scholarship is growing in new directions, including the artful innovations in processes and data central to the work of teacher educators and other professionals.

As a dynamic element of collaboration, we experiment with artful designs as a duo and in transdisciplinary groups. Polyvocal co-creativity is epitomized in published pieces using a medley of arts-inspired modes and data, including:

- artifacts (Samaras, 2010; 2013; Samaras et al., 2019);
- collage (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018a);
- dance (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016);
- dialogue (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020);
- drawing (Samaras et al., 2014; Van Laren et al., 2014);
- mood boards (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2017);
- painting (Mittapalli & Samaras, 2008);
- photography (Racines & Samaras, 2015);
- poetry and poetic performances (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Samaras et al., 2015; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019);
- play scripts and dramaturgical analysis (Meskin et al., 2017);
- readers' theater (Van Laren et al., 2019);
- rich pictures (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2021);
- scrapbooking (Van Laren et al., 2016);
- vignettes (Hiralaal et al., 2018);
- visual exegesis of a painting (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018b);
- visually rich digital work (Samaras et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2018); and
- working with objects (Dhlula-Moruri et al., 2017).

This chapter opens a window into polyvocal co-creativity in self-study. First, we offer an exemplar of our poetic self-study research in which we ask, *"How does polyvocal poetic play contribute to changing the status quo of method in researching professional knowledge and practice?"* To conclude, we consider how such collaborative creative engagement can generate new ways of knowing, with substantial implications for growth and change.

### An Exemplar of Our Co-creative Work: Poetic Self-Study Research

Over the past two decades, self-study scholars have explored poetry as a tool to generate data and as a research method responsive to and productive for addressing their collaborative inquiries. Poetry has been used as a literary arts-inspired method to enhance openness, reflexivity, critical collaborative inquiry, and transparent data analysis in data-rich, inventive self-studies. Poetry's aesthetic, figurative, and rhythmic characteristics have inspired innovative and emotive approaches to professional knowledge and practice research. The roots of the poetic movement in self-study research are evident in the co-creative work by Allender and Manke (2002) and Hopper and Sanford (2008). We further observed a recent

surge in collaborative poetic self-studies, for instance, Buchanan et al. (2020), Gísladóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2020), and Edge and Olan (2021).

Our portfolio of poetic self-study research publications (individually, as a duo, and with other co-authors) spans eight years: 2015 to 2022. Polyvocal poetic co-creativity has enriched our longstanding research partnership (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2017; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2021). For us, poetry has been yet another way to co-create, experiment, and re-invent in/about our work in self-study learning communities. As complementary colleagues, we create conditions for faculty professional empowerment by living it ourselves in co-creative ways (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2021). Our explorations in using poetry are not limited to our interactions with each other. We readily enact poetic self-study with our students and colleagues as we collectively and extensively examine our work in supervision and facilitating self-study across our universities and over time (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015; Samaras et al., 2015; Samaras et al., 2019).

To respond to our guiding research question concerning our poetic research as an exemplar of polyvocal co-creative self-study, we enacted a collective self-study method (Samaras et al., 2008) with collaborative analysis and co-reflexivity (Davey & Ham, 2009; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015). Data evolved over time and included three word clouds and ongoing almost daily dialogue via email. Word clouds and conversations helped us think about and see the trajectory of our poetic self-study work alongside other scholars' work. We did not plan to collect this data set, but it emerged piece by piece from our wanting to explore. Thus, our data evolved "through the process of creating" (Sweet et al., 2020, p. 1) in relation to our shifting thinking over time and with poetic self-study as our compass.

To begin the process, Kathleen created a series of word clouds using an online vocabulary visualization tool, Word Sift (<http://wordsift.org>). After each word cloud was completed, we discussed what we noticed and then decided on the source material for the subsequent word cloud.

The first word cloud (see Figure 1) showed the 50 most frequently used words in the titles of published poetic self-study research we identified in a literature review spanning the past two decades (including our own publications).



And, the third word cloud (see Figure 3) was made from only the titles of our published poetic self-study research as a duo.



**Figure 3. A word cloud showing the most frequently used words in the titles of our poetic self-study research published as a duo (2015-2021)**

Creating the word clouds allowed us to move between what the self-study field has produced and our work and place within that body of work. Previously, we could see what was central to our poetic self-study research. Still, we had not taken the opportunity to dialogue about what that center actually means to us and others using an inductive mode for analysis.

Juxtaposing our word cloud with the other two allowed us to see our work in the context of the body of poetic self-study scholarship. We noted *bricolage*, *polyvocal*, *creativity*, *play*, *transdisciplinary*, *virtual*, and *place* as seven distinctive features of our poetic self-study research as a duo (see Figure 3).

Next, we played with writing our thinking about our co-authored work's seven keyword features. First, Anastasia sent Kathleen her thoughts about *bricolage*:

*Bricolage*: building, fluid unknown, multidimensional paths

Kathleen replied:

*Bricolage*: improvising, making new, adventuring

We continued writing our thinking with the other key feature words. Thus, we were able to compile our thoughts not as an echo but as a double voice with us as the two narrators, each having a voice and yet as a polyvocal whole. One might liken this to a concerto for two violins who alone only carry one melody but then merge into a beautiful multiphonic piece. And in this case, it is similarly two self-study scholars performing. Anastasia wove together the writing of our thinking as a two-voice poem (Fleischman, 1988; Johri, 2015).

## Poetic Self-Study for us is...

### *Bricolage*

emerging  
fluid unknown  
multidimensional paths  
    improvising  
    making new  
    adventuring

### *Polyvocal*

many voices  
many stories matter  
*I am because we are*  
    reciprocity  
    learning  
    communion

### *Creativity*

co-creating  
imagining  
innovating  
borderless  
    flow  
    resourcefulness  
    revisioning  
    excitement!

### *Play*

fun  
messiness  
togetherness  
room to grow  
    freedom  
    choice  
    bold  
    critical growth

### *Transdisciplinary*

magically transformative  
diverse insights  
gifts  
    multiplicity  
    a beginner's mind  
    new vantage points

### *Virtual*

connections  
across time and space  
possibilities  
    bi-directional  
    bricolage  
    open channel

### *Place*

identity  
culture  
situated knowing  
intersections self with others  
    roots  
    indigenous resources  
    puzzle pieces  
    welcoming

Figure 4. A two-voice poem



The double voice poem served as a research poem (Langer & Furman, 2004) to distill the essence of our data (the three word clouds, the seven key feature words, the writing of our thinking inspired by the key feature words). In addition, it offers a two-voice representation of our personal responses to the guiding research question.

As we read and re-read the poem, we saw the characteristics of our poetic inquiry against a backdrop of the broader field. Next, using the poem as an interpretive stimulus, we dialogued to consider our contributions situated in the landscape of poetic self-study research. Finally, using letter-writing as a dialogic self-study method (Allender & Allender, 2006; Ciuffetelli Parker, 2006; Samaras & Sell, 2013), we shared what we better understood now:

It is indeed a joyful sound to read our double voice poem! I don't think we would have been able to grasp the uniqueness of our work without placing it in the context of our colleagues' work. I'm grateful to our self-study colleagues for their courage to explore poetic methods and their contributions to re-envisioning educational practice. I'm also grateful for our collaboration as it was because of you along with our colleagues that I have been able to be a part of this self-study poetic inquiry movement.

Our poetic inquiry began with challenging ourselves and the field of what method and data could be, combining method in *bricolage* and with researchers as *polyvocal* and *transdisciplinary* and methodologically inventive. We never hesitated to practice *creativity* and to *play* poetically. The ocean apart allowed us to experiment in a *virtual* world. Rather than limiting us, the virtual space gave us new platforms to stretch our ways of knowing method and combining poetry with other art forms. We lived and talked about our personal *place* and considered what we each brought to our poetic polyvocal world. Our thinking in space enabled us to extend self-study method and offer scholars poetically polyvocal modalities to consider as they explore their research questions. Mostly, I believe our poetic inquiry further liberated us as researchers who continue to question the status quo of method while we work to promote learning and wholehearted professional living for ourselves and others.  
— *Anastasian*

Thank you for the gift of this new poem. In just a month, we have moved from the literature review to the word clouds, writing our thinking inspired by the key feature words, and now this double voice poem. Time, effort, and deep thought were involved, yet it appears almost seamless looking back. Each step evolved as we went along. Once again, our back and forth process took on a life of its own, culminating in the poem and letters. The improvisational nature of our research is intertwined with the fluidity of our poetry making. Over the past seven years, working as a duo and with others, we have created poems in various forms in response to diverse research questions. While the poems differ, the dynamism of the co-creative process is a common thread that binds the work and draws us onwards to new adventures. Although poetic inquiry is not unique to self-study research, self-study does seem particularly well-suited to poetic explorations. Self-study's methodological elasticity and multiplicity combine with the meditative nature of self-reflexivity as we play with arrangements of words and their lyrical, figurative, and rhythmic qualities. Your background in playful pedagogy and mine in teaching creative writing come together delightfully.

This new piece of work has allowed us to see our polyvocal poetic play in the context of the rich history of innovative work by early self-study luminaries and the



recent outgrowth of poetic self-study scholarship. It's inspiring to learn more about our roots, and I'm excited to witness new paths for professional learning and growth opening up!

— Kathleen

## Towards New Ways of Knowing

Writing into each other's thinking brought about poetry and letters that helped us recognize that while co-creating polyvocal poetic play nourishes our professional souls, it also opens new paths for professional knowledge. Thus, as we explored our poetic self-study research by continuing to weave into each other's thinking, we gained a more profound understanding of the promise of co-creative polyvocal poetic play, not only for ourselves but also for others. As a result, polyvocal poetic play may be viewed as a form of knowledge creation that provides various epistemic options for bringing us to new understandings of professional activity.

Most notably, we have discovered that our co-creative innovations have opened up places and spaces to progress and grow professionally for ourselves and for others. We see our co-creative collaboration as what John-Steiner (2000) 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). Much of the wonder and impact of our work has been because we embraced the uncertainty of experimentation and resulting discoveries, which is the essence of being arts-inspired researchers.

As self-study scholars, we are grateful that we can continue co-creating in method, which we believe is essential to the broader educational research community. As we design new ways of thinking about what method and data mean and adapt ways of seeing and representing research, we invite others to explore self-study methodology to experience co-creative spaces that contribute generously to educational research globally.

We welcome others to consider using the arts to generate imaginative and emotive perspectives when contemplating how they might approach their data collection and analysis. How might we allow our research to unfold organically in a co-creative unprescribed process, and what might we discover in that process? We found that polyvocal poetic play allowed us to see others, our work, and ourselves in ways we could not see otherwise. For instance, we witnessed how artful play across specializations, institutions, and continents created transformative opportunities for university educators and leaders to reimagine pedagogies, research, and collaboration in complex, pluralistic ways (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018b; Samaras et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). We have also witnessed how arts-based self-study methods have been helpful to our students' learning (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020b). As we collectively generate artful research, we expand the possibilities for making connections that create powerful learning and change the status quo for professional knowledge and practice.

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