

# Studying Teacher Education

A journal of self-study of teacher education practices

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/cste20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cste20)

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**To cite this article:** Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, Linda van Laren & Lungile Masinga (15 Dec 2024): Professional Learning Through Arts-Inspired Collaborative Self-Study: Growing from the Inside Out with Rippling Effect, Studying Teacher Education, DOI: [10.1080/17425964.2024.2440358](https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2024.2440358)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2024.2440358>



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Published online: 15 Dec 2024.



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# Professional Learning Through Arts-Inspired Collaborative Self-Study: Growing from the Inside Out with Rippling Effect

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## ABSTRACT

Self-study research challenges professionals to closely examine their practices, the decisions and actions that shape them, and their commitment to their own development. Focusing on the self is not about navel-gazing but deepening professional learning to better serve others. We are three teacher educators from research-intensive institutions who have collaborated for over ten years, integrating the arts into self-study methodology to address critical educational challenges in South Africa. This study employed a multilayered approach to explore how and why arts-inspired collaborative self-study as a mode of professional learning both sustains our engagement and motivates us to do more as teacher educators and researchers. Our data sources were a) three published articles demonstrating our self-study research, b) rich pictures we each produced to answer our research questions, and c) voice notes elucidating our drawings. Data analysis involved crafting a collective poem using words and phrases extracted from tweets based on the voice notes. Combining multiple data sources with creative representation and analysis enabled us to depict and view our professional learning in various forms. Dialoguing with each other and critical friends, followed by poetic feedback from a diverse group of conference attendees, expanded our insights. Our creative interactions demonstrated the professional and methodological merit of inviting many perspectives and approaches to self-study. Multiple viewpoints and inventive methods increase self-study research's potential for enriching professional learning within a creative and resourceful community.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 December 2024  
Accepted 6 December 2024

## KEYWORDS

Professional learning;  
collaborative self-study; arts-based educational research; creative analysis; poetic feedback

Self-study of professional practice challenges researchers to look closely at and take responsibility for who they want to be and the decisions and actions that shape their development. This self-focus is not navel-gazing; it represents a deliberate commitment to taking agency in professional learning to better serve others (Feldman, 2003; LaBoskey, 2004). Self-study research is a potent instrument for self-directed professional growth within and in response to diverse educational, social, historical, and political contexts (Pithouse-Morgan, 2022; Pithouse, Mitchell, & Weber, 2009).

For over a decade, we, three South African teacher educators from research-intensive institutions, have chosen to pursue professional growth through integrating the arts into

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self-study methodology. Working as a trio and with other colleagues, we have experienced diverse creative ways of learning about ourselves, our practice, and others, raising new possibilities and perspectives (Cole & Knowles, 2008). We have used various arts-inspired modes and methods, including:

- Collage (Masinga et al., 2016)
- Dialogue (Pithouse-Morgan & van Laren, 2015)
- Drawing (van Laren et al., 2014)
- Letter writing (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012)
- Poetry (van Laren et al., 2020)
- Scrapbooking (van Laren et al., 2016)
- Storyboarding (Pithouse-Morgan, van Laren, et al., 2015)
- Storytelling (Masinga, 2014)

Our self-study projects are based on the theoretical foundations laid by luminaries in arts-based educational research such as Barone and Eisner (2006) and Cole and Knowles (2008). These scholars explained how and why integrating the arts provides different avenues for educational research and allows for the expression of new knowledge in ways typical academic texts might overlook. Critically, arts-based educational scholarship emphasizes the imaginative potential of the arts to enable us to see things from new perspectives, awakening a sense of possibility and experiential awareness that positive change is always conceivable (Eisner, 2002). Weber and Mitchell (2004) specifically highlighted the potential of the arts for self-study, emphasizing how arts-based approaches enhance professional learning. They argued that arts-based self-study methods ‘increase the likelihood of a fulfilling and satisfying sort of inquiry, the kind that encourages teachers and teacher educators to continue, and inspires practitioners to become more the kind of people, teachers, and researchers they want to be’ (p. 1030).

The submissions call for the 14th Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) International Castle Conference (Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices, n.d.) invited self-study researchers to pause and reflect to integrate new learnings from the past, present, and future. In response to that call and Weber and Mitchell’s (2004) insight into how arts-based approaches can enhance professional learning, we decided to look backward and forward to ask, ‘How does arts-inspired collaborative self-study encourage us to continue, and motivate us to become more the kind of teacher educators and researchers we want to be?’ and ‘Why does this matter?’ To respond, we selected three published articles in which arts-inspired methods served as conversation starters and approaches to data representation and analysis (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018; van Laren et al., 2019, 2020). We used these texts as material for pausing to co-reflect on our professional learning through arts-inspired collaborative self-study. The texts were the foundation for a multilayered arts-inspired self-study process that evolved organically through collective decision-making at each stage.

The next section of this article summarizes each of the three texts that served as the source material for our study. After that, we describe our multilayered arts-inspired self-study process. Next, we explain how dialoguing with each other and critical friends, followed by poetic feedback from a diverse group of conference attendees, extended

our insights. To close, we consider how this self-study has contributed to our professional growth and what it may offer to others looking to take their professional learning in new directions.

### The Three Selected Articles

Our first article (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2018) explored how we revealed and confronted the complex issue of emotional fears as advisors of graduate students using self-study research to make a difference in several South African higher education institutions. Against the backdrop of pervasive traumatic stress related to the history of oppression and conflict in South Africa, we focused on the effort required to understand and respond to complex emotional knowledge in supportive and resourceful ways (Collins, 2013; Jansen, 2009). Together with three other colleagues, we asked, ‘How can we work collaboratively and creatively to learn to navigate emotional entanglements in supervising self-study research?’ Although our study focused on self-study research supervision in South Africa, we were mindful that research supervision, in general, can be emotionally taxing (Strandler et al., 2014). This is especially true of self-study supervision because of the openness and vulnerability required (Pithouse-Morgan, Muthukrishna, et al., 2015).

In this first article, the self-study process began with the visual exegesis (critical explanation or interpretation) of a painting (Hamilton, 2005). We chose to work with an expressionist painting because expressionism offers subjective perspectives and elicits emotional responses (Gordon, 1966). We collectively composed a poem to represent our reactions to the visual exegesis. Our examination showed how, over time, arts-inspired self-study with trusted colleagues facilitated the unfolding of emotional complexities in a contained and responsive manner. Emotional containment entails creating conditions in which emotions are purposefully aired in a secure environment to increase capacity for action and change (James, 2011). Our self-study showed how collaborative learning that used creative entry points and elicited subjective responses in a safe environment facilitated a deeper understanding of emotional perplexities. We believe this is critical to developing self-study supervision pedagogy in a personally and socially just manner.

Our other two selected articles centered on discussions regarding HIV and AIDS in higher education environments. Given that millions of people in South Africa are infected with HIV, the pandemic continues to be a significant societal concern. HIV and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination remain major sources of social injustice (KNOW, Be in the, 2022). As teacher educators, we have an educational and social responsibility to support teachers in higher education and schools to openly and constructively address issues related to HIV and AIDS (Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme, 2012). In both articles, we drew on research and teaching strategies inspired by the performing, visual, and literary arts to facilitate HIV and AIDS-related conversations (van Laren et al., 2019, 2020).

The first of these two articles focused on creating a readers’ theater script. Readers’ theater script writing is a creative, analytical technique in which researchers form a dramatic script from edited excerpts of a research transcript (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). We composed a readers’ theater script to reflect on our use of everyday objects for opening dialogues in an HIV and AIDS curriculum integration workshop. The workshop attendees included university educators and graduate students from various departments at a neighboring university (van Laren et al., 2019). This self-study asked,

‘What can we learn about workshoping HIV and AIDS curriculum integration research in higher education by collaboratively composing and reflecting on a readers’ theater script?’

We chose responses from three workshop participants to illustrate the outcomes of the object activity when writing our script (van Laren et al., 2019). We recognized that writing the readers’ theater script provided thought-provoking opportunities to interrogate and strengthen our professional learning. The script became a mirror to see our progress in understanding the value of arts-inspired, participatory activities in higher education for containing and connecting professional learning, particularly in emotionally charged areas such as HIV and AIDS.

We wanted to build on our learning from creating a readers’ theater script (van Laren et al., 2019) for the next article (van Laren et al., 2020). Following the script’s completion, we asked five teacher-educator colleagues to read it aloud at a South African national education conference. After the presentation, we asked, ‘What can we learn about imagining new ways of knowing for social change by staging a readers’ theater script?’ We then discussed how other educators reacted to the idea of using such a tool to promote conversations about HIV and AIDS. To reflect on the learning potential of using the script, we engaged with the script readers and the audience who attended the conference session. As poetic analysis, we composed a series of blank verse poems (Literary Devices, 2019). We concluded that staging a reader’s theater script could aid educational change by opening productive conversations about HIV and AIDS issues.

## **The Multilayered Arts-Inspired Self-Study Process**

### ***Participants***

As co-scholars in this collaborative self-study, we served both as researchers and research participants to explore our shared research questions (Pithouse, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2009). Located in two different South African cities, we primarily conducted our work through email and a dedicated virtual group space on the WhatsApp message application.

### ***Trustworthiness and Quality***

To enhance trustworthiness, we provide step-by-step details of our exploratory self-study research process (Feldman, 2003). We describe our data sources, analysis, and how our study progressed. The characteristic of vigor in poetic inquiry influenced the study design (Faulkner, 2016). Considering vigor as a self-study quality indicator motivated us to prioritize growth, vitality, and energy in our work.

### ***Data Sources***

The three selected published articles served as our primary data sources. The second set of data sources consisted of rich pictures that we individually drew in response to our research questions, ‘How does arts-inspired collaborative self-study encourage us to continue and motivate us to become more the kind of teacher educators and researchers

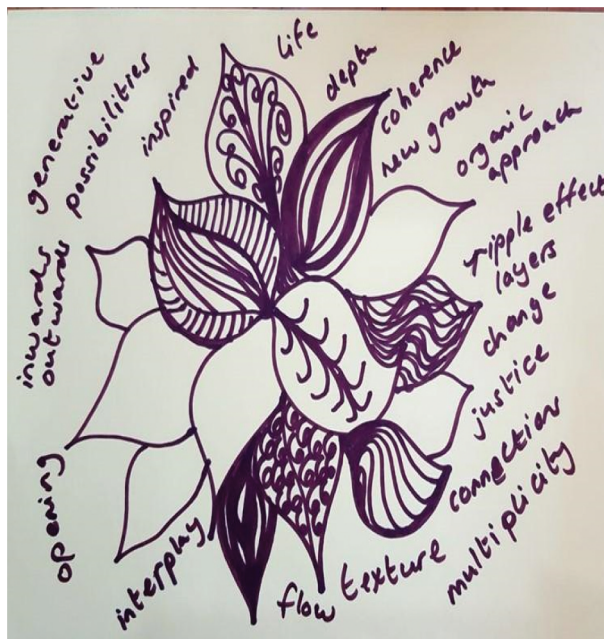


Figure 1. Kathleen's Rich Picture: "something organic and growing".

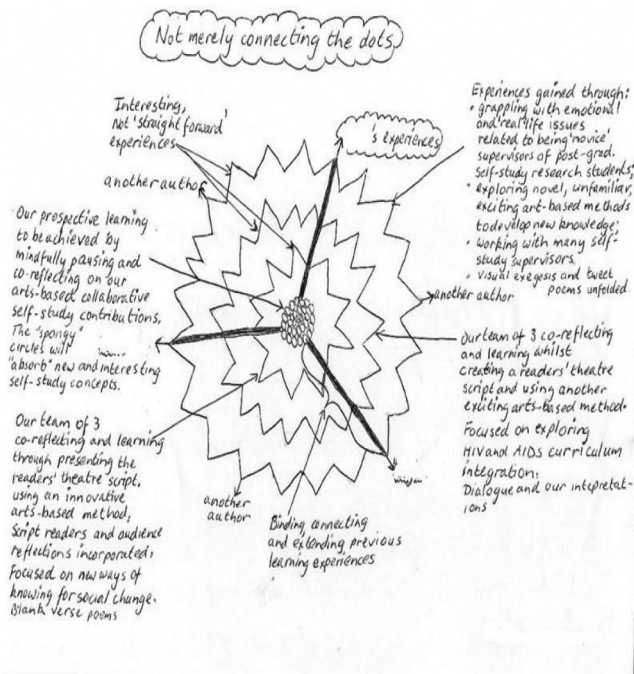
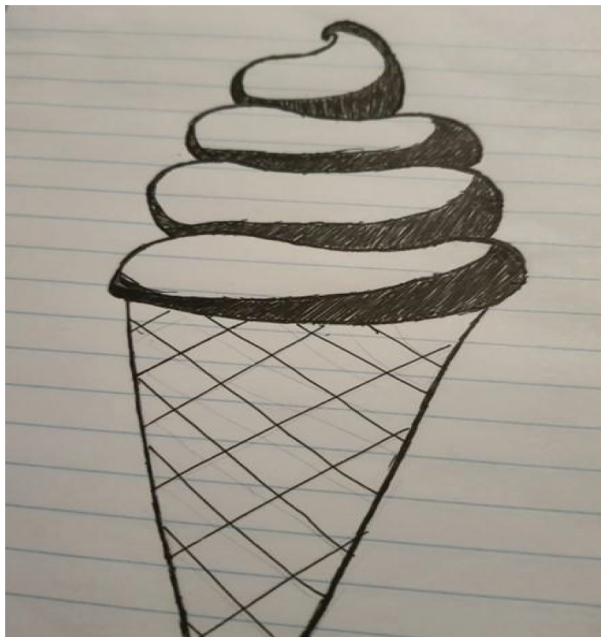


Figure 2. Linda's Rich Picture: "not merely connecting the dots".





**Figure 3.** Lungile’s Rich Picture: “ice-cream cone”.

we want to be?’ and ‘Why does this matter?’ (see [Figures 1, 2, 3](#)). Rich pictures are a kind of visual brainstorming that uses detailed images to produce new perspectives on a topic or question. Initially used in soft systems methodology (Checkland, 2000), rich pictures have been successfully used in collaborative self-study research (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2021). Kathleen had previously used rich images in other self-study collaborations, but this was the first time we created rich pictures as a research team.

We each drew a black-and-white image to represent our initial, personal response to the research questions. After creating the pictures and sending photos of them to one another, we each shared a voice note describing our drawing via WhatsApp. The third set of data sources consisted of the transcripts of these three WhatsApp voice notes. Our rich pictures and lightly edited excerpts from the voice note descriptions are presented below.

**Kathleen:** My rich picture is of growing leaves or a flower, which is quite beautiful because of its uniqueness. The uniqueness comes from our collaborative work’s different shapes, textures, and patterns. Those come from our life experiences and backgrounds, mixed with the various arts-inspired forms we experiment with. I have filled in some of the leaves or petals. We have created those pieces together and individually, but many leaves or petals are still waiting for our new adventures to be filled in.

Our capacities and experiences combine to create something that couldn’t be made alone, something living, dynamic, and organic. We do this experimenting because it’s fun, and we enjoy doing it together, but we also do it because there is a need for change, growth, and justice at the center. It’s a deep sense that we, as teachers and teacher educators, parents and grandparents, are committed to working for a better world—particularly for young people. And we’ve seen a ripple effect when we’ve shared our work, which can offer people new ways of looking at things and fresh ideas. (Excerpt from the transcript of Kathleen’s WhatsApp voice note, September 10, 2021)

**Linda:** I titled my annotated diagram 'Not Merely Connecting the Dots'. The jagged appearance of the diagram indicates the non-conventional arts-inspired methods we explored. I drew three concentric, irregular, concave polygons to represent our three articles.

The outermost polygon represents my experiences working with other self-study researchers in exploring the emotional entanglements in supervising self-study research. Our experiences were emotionally charged as we grappled with being novice supervisors of graduate self-study research students.

The next polygon represents my experiences in creating a readers' theater script to make public our learning about HIV and AIDS curriculum integration at a higher education workshop. The innermost polygon depicts my learning experiences from staging our readers' theater script at a national conference.

The spongy central part of the diagram represents our prospective learning by co-reflecting on our experiences after publishing our three articles. As a research team, we intended to bind, connect, and extend our knowledge by pausing to facilitate and look forward to thought-provoking, shared, and novel self-study experiences. (Excerpt from the transcript of the Linda's WhatsApp voice note, September 9, 2021)

**Lungile:** The ice cream cone made me think of our experiments with arts-inspired methods. These methods help us in receiving ideas and balancing our thoughts. They create a beautiful vessel to communicate various issues. We have written and spoken through them and engaged in physical activities. The cone is the foundation where all these collaborative ideas are created. I look at the twirling of the ice cream; like it, we are going around in upward mobility, where each layer in the twirling keeps growing. Our first enjoyment is that tip, the first thing we bite into, and I think that is where our work is now.

People find enjoyment at that peak, and the more they dig into it, the more they realize its impact on the various issues we share with our diverse audiences in different ways. But I see it intertwining, and I see us in there because for that twirl to stay firm, it has to work together, and we have found our balance through our collaboration, where we are feeding off each other. Sometimes, we have more than one form of arts-inspired method we work with. Eventually, it comes together. I see our work as intertwined and twirling to create something we enjoy making and sharing. (Excerpt from the transcript of the Lungile's WhatsApp voice note, September 16, 2021)

Kathleen and Linda drew similar, whirled, concentric two-dimensional diagrams. Kathleen focused on ongoing aspects of growth related to professional learning, whereas Linda provided summaries and connections related to our professional learning demonstrated in the three articles. Lungile also drew a whirled shape, representing a three-dimensional object to emphasize aspects of collaborative learning.

## **Data Analysis**

We opted to make sense of the data through a creative, analytical process (Richardson (2000)). Combining different analytical modes allowed us to portray and view our professional learning from multiple perspectives.

### **Step 1: Tweets**

As the first step in our analysis, we created tweets (on Twitter, now X, an online messaging platform) inspired by the voice notes describing our rich pictures. We utilized tweets for



data analysis because the 280-character limit and the public nature of the platform promote concise and clear communication. Composing the tweets necessitated sifting through our voice note transcriptions to discern what we each saw as most relevant to our guiding research questions.

**Kathleen's Tweet:** As teachers and teacher educators, we are committed to working for a better world, particularly for young people. We see the ripple effect of arts-inspired collaborative self-study methods and how they offer new ways of looking at things. And that matters; it makes a difference! (September 27, 2021)

**Linda's Tweet:** As a team of self-study researchers, we balance, sustain and nurture organic growth of our professional learning. Arts-inspired methods facilitate our 'making a difference' aims. We connect, extend and pursue purposeful yet unique, unpredictable and adventurous research journeys. (September 24, 2021)

**Lungile's Tweet:** Beautiful vessel for connecting messages that is organic and growing with rippling effect. Arts-inspired methods help bind, connect and extend our thought-provoking contributions. Collectively we pause to co-reflect on our powerful intertwining work for change, growth and justice. (September 28, 2021)

## Step 2: The Poem

We used the tweets as material for poetic analysis, creating a found poem (Butler-Kisber, 2005) by selecting words and phrases from three tweets that resonated with each other. Our found poem is an example of '*collective work poetry*, [where] several research participants' words are combined in one poem around a theme' (Lahman, 2024, p. 191). The poem's design was influenced by the renga, a traditional Japanese form of linked-verse poetry characterized by a 5- and 7-syllable pattern and typically constructed by two or more poets in a conversational style (Britannica, 2021). Kathleen proposed an adaptation of renga in which different team members crafted certain parts of the poem using words and phrases from our set of tweets.

We worked via email to create 'An Organic Vessel With Rippling Effect' (Figure 4), focusing on the pleasure and spontaneity of thinking and expressing through poetry rather than on literary excellence. We curated and arranged our ideas using the renga's condensed syllable pattern. Concise poetic forms such as the renga need 'words with higher potential energy' for maximum impact (Shaffer, 2018, para. 3). When choosing and combining words with more expansive meanings, connotations, and linkages, their impact increases while the number of words required decreases (Shaffer, 2018). The energy of the words we chose for the renga illuminated the core elements of our shared learning.

## Dialoguing and Poetic Feedback

### Dialoguing with Each Other

The found renga poem served as a compressed, metaphorical representation of our professional learning through arts-inspired collaborative self-study. To tease out what the poem was saying in relation to our research questions, we each wrote a response, which we then emailed to the others. After that, using each stanza of the poem as an

## An Organic Vessel With Rippling Effect

Self-study matters  
In making a difference  
For a better world

Inspired collaboration  
Through intertwining learning

The arts provoking  
New ways of looking, growing  
With rippling effect

Our organic vessel aims  
To connect, bind, and extend

**Figure 4.** Our found renga poem (composed from our tweets, September 28–October 3, 2021).

organizing device, we clustered resonant excerpts from our individual written reflections, emailing back and forth to create a poetic dialogue.

Dialogue, a literary and performing arts-inspired genre, exemplifies how self-study researchers learn and grow through conversation (East et al., 2009). The dialogic responses to each stanza demonstrate how discussions with trusted peers can deepen and expand individual self-study researchers' thoughts and ideas. The responses reveal various aspects of our personal yet resonant views.

### *The Poetic Dialogue (Composed from Our Emailed Individual Written Reflections, November 26–December 2, 2021)*

Self-study matters  
In making a difference  
For a better world

**Kathleen:** We continually gain new insights through arts-inspired self-study.

**Linda:** As self-study researchers who seek to make a difference by starting with ourselves, we aim to confront sensitive educational issues using generative means.

**Lungile:** Arts-inspired work allows us to push further beyond methodological boundaries and join risk-takers who aim to communicate critical issues differently.

Inspired collaboration  
Through intertwining learning

**Kathleen:** By asking questions in a collaborative setting, we learn more than we would independently.

**Linda:** We learn by connecting our ideas in exciting ways.

The arts provoking  
New ways of looking, growing  
With rippling effect

**Linda:** Combining arts-inspired forms provides many ways of expressing concepts. These forms can have various interpretations, allowing for rich, exciting ways of captivating attention or developing additional art forms for reflection and action.

**Lungile:** The arts inspire us to continue making meaning by observing, wondering, forming thoughts, and expressing.

Our organic vessel aims  
To connect, bind, and extend

**Kathleen:** Connecting in an arts-inspired place with trusted others who share similar interests provides a sense of safety and encouragement for new self-study ventures.

**Linda:** As collaborative, dedicated self-study researchers who have worked together for several years, we combine our unique strengths to extend our arts-inspired methods. This enables us to consider how we might improve our teaching and research practices.

**Lungile:** As collaborators, new conversations emerge as we connect what we have done and see future explorations and possibilities.

### *Dialoguing with Critical Friends*

Mindful pausing is also about broadening our work by asking others to comment to extend its trustworthiness and impact (Mena & Russell, 2017). Hence, to enrich our self-study process, we invited four colleagues to discuss what the found renga poem could communicate and generate. These critical friends are academics from three South African universities with whom we have a long-standing collaboration on self-study research. They have extensive experience with arts-based educational research. We were confident that they would provide candid, insightful responses to help us advance our thinking beyond ourselves. This hour-long, in-depth conversation featured many fascinating threads. What intrigued us most was how, through collaborative, multilayered arts-inspired self-study, we saw the self as a changeable assemblage.

Assemblage is a multidimensional art form created by combining disparate elements – often, everyday objects – found by the artist or specifically acquired (TATE Art Terms, 2022). The assemblage metaphor helped us understand why this work is meaningful to us and why it might be significant to others. Seeing ourselves as ‘assemblages, bricolages, cobblings, collages, conferences, patchworks’ (Badley, 2022, p. 737) that are constantly enriched and expanded by the diversity of human lives and experiences fosters an optimistic awareness of possibilities for meaningful change through professional learning. We can live and act more resourcefully and imaginatively when we see that we are not fixed, unitary, or inflexible.

## Dialoguing with a Conference Audience

At the 14th Castle S-STEP Conference, we shared our work with self-study researchers from many countries, fields, and institutions. First, we described how our common interests had sparked our decade-long collaboration. Next, we explained and demonstrated each step of merging artistic data representation with creative data analysis.

The biennial Castle Conference stands apart from many other academic conferences due to its extended presentation time, which provides more opportunities for conversation, engagement, shared learning, and inventive presentation forms (Garbett et al., 2020). The allocated time allowed us to engage our audience through an embodied experience of arts-inspired self-study. We wanted to expand our understanding by inviting the audience to provide ‘poetic feedback’ by composing free-form poems in groups (Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2024, p. 1). We purposely simplified the poetry-making process by providing steps that allowed everyone to progress from composing individual tweets to constructing collective found poems. We reassured people new to poetic self-study by emphasizing that the most crucial aspect was creative interaction rather than crafting aesthetically complex poetry.

Having presented previously at Castle Conferences, we were aware of the conference’s tradition of shared interest in learning new things. We believed the conference’s dialogic ethos would inspire individuals to attend our session with an open mind and willingness to try something new. And this was our experience during the session. Everyone in attendance showed a genuine desire to learn and contribute by creating poems and communicating their insights and responses. ‘Growing From the Inside Out’ (Figure 5) is an example of a feedback poem created by the audience members.

The phrases ‘Masks to strip away’ and ‘small ripples’ from the audience feedback poem echoed and expanded our poem ‘An Organic Vessel With Rippling Effect’. The title of the feedback poem mirrors our poem’s theme of the inward-outward value of self-study inspired by the arts, implying a ripple effect of collaborative, creative learning.

### **Growing From the Inside out**

Eager to please, scared to speak. Masks to strip away  
Center and margin these small ripples I have made  
I have valuable ideas to contribute from my experience  
Learn to become a tree in the forest  
Focus on my practice, improve, take a stance, collaborate

**Figure 5.** A feedback poem (transcript of conference participants’ handwritten poem, August 9, 2023).

As presenters, we saw ourselves in the line, ‘I have valuable ideas to contribute from my experience’, which symbolized our organic vessel of knowledge yet to be explored and shared, marking our ongoing learning through creative interaction in enriching and nurturing forums such as the Castle Conference (Garbett et al., 2020).

## Significance and Implications

The organic arts-inspired self-study process provided us with ‘new insights and also a deeper understanding of the original experience[s]’ (Edge & Olan, 2021, p. 13) articulated in our three chosen articles. As Eisner (2002) explained, ‘Our capacity to envision is transformed by the

effort to represent what we have experienced' (p. 22). We could re-envision the past and future impact of our collaborative self-study research initiatives by expressing and representing our learning using multiple forms in a new combination (rich pictures, voice notes, tweets, a poem, and a poetic dialogue).

Taking time for creative analysis and interaction helped us understand more about who we want to be as teacher educators and self-study researchers and why that matters. We could re-see, re-hear, and re-live our arts-inspired collaborative self-study journey by consciously pausing and using a new grouping of creative methods to depict our shared experiences in various forms. In pausing to review and dialogue about our professional learning with each other and our critical friends, we saw how we continue to grow and learn collectively and individually. We also appreciated how our arts-inspired self-study research efforts strengthen our commitment to compassionate and socially just education. As a welcoming hub for multiple scholarly voices in self-study research, the Castle Conference allowed us to articulate, expand, and see the impact of our learning through an interactive poetic feedback exercise.

Our joint self-study expeditions have led us through various creative modalities outside conventional academic frameworks. Looking beyond ourselves, we have seen how sharing our arts-inspired work can have a 'ripple effect' (Weber, 2014, p. 12), involving and encouraging others. This self-study has demonstrated how teacher educators can combine diverse modes to represent and re-envision our professional learning in multiple creative forms (Eisner, 2002). Finding and using fresh metaphors to explain the reasoning behind our everyday actions keeps us moving forward in new directions (Bullough, 1994). We hope that 'An Organic Vessel With Rippling Effect' and 'Growing From the Inside Out' will inspire others to generate multilayered self-studies in which they can consciously pause and dialogue about developing as the kind of people, practitioners, and researchers they want to be within and in response to the contexts in which they live and work.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to our critical friends, Anita Hiralaal, Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker, and Theresa Chisanga, for their valuable contributions to our learning.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in our Castle Conference presentation.

We sincerely appreciate the permission of Tanya van der Walt, Candy Jones, Hafdis Guðjónsdóttir, Tamar Meskin, and Megumi Nishida to include their poem "Growing From the Inside out," and to acknowledge them as the poets.

While preparing this work, the authors used QuillBot for paraphrasing and Grammarly for language polishing. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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