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“Our Words Flowing into Wide Futures”

Making a Difference Through Poetic Professional Learning

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1 Starting with My Self

I am a white South African who was born and grew up during apartheid. I qualified as a teacher in 1995, the year after South Africa’s first democratic elections and I have now been teaching for 25 years, first as a schoolteacher and then as a university-based teacher educator. Currently, I teach graduate modules and supervise graduate students’ research in the specialisation of teacher development studies at a South African university. My students are teachers with varied educational backgrounds, teaching different subjects in schools and higher education institutions. During the apartheid era (1948–1994), most of them would have been racially classified as African, Indian, or coloured.

My academic work is located in professional learning, with a focus on teachers’ self-directed learning, undertaken in dialogue with others. In line with the views of Webster-Wright (2009), I am drawn to understandings of professional learning that emphasise how teachers and other professionals can develop vital insights into their own personal and professional selves and practise to bring about change for the better. My scholarship is grounded in professional learning for teachers and teacher educators and has extended into research on polyvocal professional learning across disciplines in higher education (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015).

In conceptualising polyvocal professional learning, Samaras and I have built on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) in-depth analysis of

polyvocality (which he called polyphony) as a narrative approach in the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who interplayed distinct voices and viewpoints in his writing. Our multifaceted conceptualisation of polyvocal professional learning, epitomised by plurality, interaction and interdependence, and creative activity, is inspired by heterogeneous bodies of knowledge and is characterised by a pluralism of ways of knowing, doing, and communicating (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2018, 2019).

For the past two decades, I have been studying my own professional learning through self-study and narrative research (see Pithouse, 2005; Pithouse-Morgan, 2019). Through this self-reflexive research, my professional learning has been troubled, deepened, and expanded in critical ways. As a work-in-progress, my teacher self and my teaching practice continue to develop in relationship with students and colleagues.

Through scholarship and teaching, I strive to acknowledge the agency of teachers in lived experiences of professional learning. This emphasis on “teachers as transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1988, p. 125) developed in response to my understanding of how authoritarian and technicist apartheid-era teacher training and management continues to constrain South African teachers’ professional learning experiences long after the dismantling of apartheid policies (Msibi & McHunu, 2013; Pithouse-Morgan, 2016).

During the apartheid era, the state enforced racial classifications to stratify South African society. A fundamental part of this stratification was a racially segregated education system deliberately aimed at advantaging the white minority and disadvantaging the majority of South Africans (Christie, 1991). Apartheid-era schooling was typified by a “strong behaviourist and non-inquiry ethos” (Henning & van Rensburg, 2002, p. 85). For instance, the teaching of creative writing frequently focused on the reproduction of model essays. Similarly, the teaching of literature and poetry was often confined to the memorisation of model answers and prescribed poems. To illustrate, when Bridget Campbell (2016), a teacher educator of English education in a South African university, asked a class of 54 student teachers about their school-based encounters with poetry, most responded with words such as “horrible,” “confusing,” and even “torture” (p. 10). They explained that at school they “were not given the opportunity to explore the poems themselves and to form their own opinions as the teachers’ ideas and interpretations were imposed on them” (p. 10).

Notwithstanding substantial post-apartheid curriculum policy change, a behaviourist and non-inquiry ethos can still be observed in many South African schools and higher education institutions (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Bharuthram, 2012). With this in mind, I do my utmost to enliven my teaching and research with modes of active inquiry that are informed by “the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). This commitment to the arts is rooted in a love of reading fiction and poetry that was nurtured in my early childhood by my mother (see Pithouse-Morgan, 2019). Also, unlike many South Africans, I am fortunate to have had some very encouraging encounters with the arts at school. For instance, several teachers recognised and nurtured my early interest in creative writing. And, at secondary school, I received merit awards for short story and poetry writing in a prestigious regional creative writing competition. Looking back, I can see how these affirming experiences laid a strong foundation for arts-inspired teaching and research.

2 Finding Poetry in Professional Learning

My explorations in self-reflexive and arts-informed research have given rise to a distinctive formulation of poetic professional learning as a literary arts-inspired means of researching and enhancing professional learning (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019). I have worked with many others, in South Africa and internationally, to cultivate a portfolio of work that engages the power of poetic inquiry for researching and performing professional learning (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015; Pithouse-Morgan, Chisanga, Meyiwa, & Timm, 2018).

Poetic inquiry develops through infusing qualitative research with the imaginative possibilities of poetry (Leggo, 2008). Poetry can be seen to exist on a continuum as Young (1982) has pointed out. Near one end is poetry that can be acknowledged as fulfilling identifiable literary and artistic criteria. Near the other end, playing with poetic language and forms of expression can foster imaginative engagement without necessarily generating poems that demonstrate literary expertise or that have innate artistic merit. My emphasis is on the lived experience of poetry making and poetic communication for the educative purposes of studying and enhancing professional learning.

In this chapter, I show how I looked back over this portfolio of work to inquire about its impetus and impact. I asked, “What difference

can poetry make to professional learning?" To respond to the question, I created a "poetic bricolage" (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019, p. 5) using words and phrases from nine professional learning poems, composed over a span of five years. Some of these were composed individually and some with others. However, the poems I composed on my own were inspired by the voices and stories of students and colleagues, so, for me, they are all polyvocal.

In the arts, bricolage signifies "construction or creation from a diverse range of available things" (Bricolage, n.d.). Constructing a poetic bricolage offered a "container . . . for a gradual distillation of [my] multifaceted and complex learning, experienced over time" (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019, p. 7). I chose to arrange this poetic bricolage using the traditional Japanese renga form, which is a type of linked-verse poetry usually generated by two or more poets as a kind of conversation (see Poets.org, 2004a). The title I chose for the renga was, "*Our Words Changing My Story.*"

Our Words Changing My Story

Always a learner
Struggling to move, uncertain
Still feeling my way

I find a chest of treasures,
Care at the centre of it

Look back with purpose
Stepping into the unknown
Stand in the midst, *breathe*

Our words, blending, flowing out
Like vines, changing *my story*

Listening, connect!
Letting go and opening
To *our wide futures*

As I arranged the renga, I saw how each stanza could serve as an entry point for further conversation. In many of the poetic professional learning pieces I have written with others, we have used dialogue as a literary arts-inspired mode for exploring and representing our co-learning. Building on this, in response to the

renga, I created a dialogic bricolage by combining excerpts from eight of these published dialogues, lightly edited for flow and coherence. In what follows, each stanza is followed by an exchange between distinctive voices from different contexts.

Always a learner
Struggling to move, uncertain
Still feeling my way

Edwina Grossi: When I was starting my dissertation, memories and pictures, thoughts and feelings were rekindled and were given a voice as they translated into words that fell into verse. I was free to write from the heart, not the head! However, at the start I feared my work was too simplistic, too non-academic, and too below par for a doctoral dissertation. Was I brave and strong and true enough to weave my simple poetry around the pieces of my dissertation?

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: Doing this work was very humbling as it exposed my poetic vulnerabilities. I had genuine fearful moments.

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.

Linda Fitzgerald: But many people are coming with a lot of struggles, being told that this is not legitimate, it's not really research. How do you support people through that to keep going?

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

Anastasia P. Samaras: It does take somebody who is willing to say, 'Let's go and do this! Let's try this!' Engaging in the arts is the portal, but it needs to be done in a way that does scaffold one into understanding things otherwise.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: What is also important is to keep finding opportunities to show others, especially leaders in our institutions, how and why this work matters.

**I find a chest of treasures,
Care at the centre of it**

Nithi Muthukrishna: Most of our students come from a background of exposure to very traditional, linear kinds of research. But what I have found is that they embrace the experience of a dynamic learning community that explores creative ways of doing research, and soon they are eager to take risks and engage in social inquiry using innovative, reflexive methods and artistic modes.

S'phiwe Madondo: I did not know that I could express and make meaning of my own experiences through composing poems. The style of language teaching during my own primary school days in the 1980s promoted rote learning. For example, we were expected to read and memorise poems. I do not remember any poetry lessons that demanded our creative thinking or writing. Many years later, by bringing poetry into my research process, I was able to learn first-hand about developing a flair for poetic communication.

Delysia Timm: I, as many of our students do, come from an educational background where the arts and poetry have not been given much educational value compared to chemistry, mathematics, science, and technology. I was not provided with learning opportunities to express my creativity through performance and fun activities in the classroom. However, through co-learning and engaging in the poetic process, I am now moving towards flourishing in my practice as a university educator and researcher.

Theresa Chisanga: It has been wonderful to see the endless possibilities for doing research right there in the space that had previously felt tight and uncomfortable, and which seemed to be throttling the research capacity in me. There was support and genuine cooperation with a community that encouraged and reminded me constantly that my role was critical.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: We are drawn together through our mutual interest and then, through exploring that interest, trust, understanding, and care can grow.

Daisy Pillay: Because of that prolonged, interactive, caring engagement, it becomes another way to look at the world.

Look back with purpose
Stepping into the unknown
Stand in the midst, *breathe*

S’phiwe Madondo: Through writing interpretive poetry, I was able to identify significant educational and emotional episodes in my past.

Chris de Beer: The whole process was very emergent and messy; a lot 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!

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.

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 helps the next person.

Our words, blending, flowing out
Like vines, changing my story

Anastasia P. Samaras: I’ve been continually enriched by my experiences in moving out of my lens. That’s been where I’ve been able to really grow and be inspired.

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.

Linda Van Laren: So, we're crossing borders?

Inbanathan Naicker: And we've become entangled in the process.

Daisy Pillay: That's what makes us living beings, that ongoing dialogue. It frees us to imagine new possibilities.

Listening, connect!
Letting go and opening
To our wide futures

Thenjiwe Meyiwa: Each person enriches and contributes to the collective journey. Co-learning requires us to listen and accommodate various points of view.

Daisy Pillay: Feeling safe and hopeful and human comes not by using our uniqueness to stay separate and lonely, but to connect with the unique in the other.

Jean Stuart: I think it's related to the openness of our collaboration. There's no resistance against an idea coming in.

Delysia Timm: It is during and through the sharing process that we undergo a transformation. Doors are opened and we venture into new areas.

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan: I'm reminded of the final line of Grace Nichols' (1984) beautiful metaphor poem, "A Praise Song for My Mother." The poem ends with the words, "Go to your wide futures." Because of our dynamic, creative collaboration, there is that sense of spaciousness and possibility, of wide futures.

3 **What Difference Can Poetry Make to Professional Learning?**

The medley of voices presented in this chapter communicates how students, teachers, and academics who might not call themselves experienced or well-qualified poets can come together and play with the artistic potential of poetic forms and language to generate

research data, representations, and interpretations. Even when the poems themselves might not be regarded as literary or artistic texts, the experience of poetry making, especially when it is collective, can permeate professional learning research and practice with imagination, feeling, and sensory impressions in ways that intensify and interconnect self-insight, care for others, and social awareness.

Through assembling words as poems, we can articulate and become engrossed in lived experiences and perspectives that might be tricky to convey or grasp in conventional academic language. Composing poetry with others in a mutually supportive environment can facilitate creative, multi-perspective meaning-making to reimagine ourselves and our educational practice in ways that respond to pressing social concerns. Overall, poetic inquiry can enrich professional learning research and practice in arts-inspired ways that can contribute to personal and social change.

What is more, fostering affirming and generative poetic experiences is particularly critical in the context of South Africa, where the teaching of poetry has often been confined to the memorisation of prescribed poems and where disheartening teaching approaches continue to make many people believe that they are not competent to create or understand poetry.

When teachers in schools and universities enact poetic professional learning, this can inspire them to work differently with poetry in the classroom by opening up supportive and gratifying possibilities for students to delve into reading, writing, and performing poetry in ways that allow them to experience “imagination [as] a source of exploratory delight” (Eisner, 2002, p. 5). Changing the atmosphere of the classroom can motivate students and demonstrate how poetry can become a dynamic part of their lives (Ferguson, 2017).

In closing, to encapsulate my response to my guiding question, “What difference can poetry make to professional learning?” I used words and phrases from the renga poem to create a second poem in the more concise tanka format. The tanka is a Japanese poetic form that moves from depicting an image in the first two lines to responding to that image in the final two lines, with the third line denoting the change of viewpoint (see Poets.org, 2004b). I titled the tanka, “Our Words Flowing into Wide Futures.”

Our Words Flowing into Wide Futures

Stand in the midst, *breathe*

Our words, blending, flowing out
Changing my story
Care at the centre, connect!
Step into our wide futures

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