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Choosing my own adventures: A short story of my doctoral journey

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I teach graduate courses and supervise graduate students' research in the academic specialisation of teacher development studies at a South African university. My students are teachers with diverse educational backgrounds, teaching a variety of subjects in schools and higher education institutions. My scholarship is grounded in teacher professional learning. In my doctoral research, I studied my own professional learning through teaching in three graduate teacher education courses. I took a narrative self-study stance toward research and pedagogy to explore my lived experience as a novice teacher educator (Pithouse, 2007). My intention was to add further understanding and impetus to the growing body of work that explores and values the teacher self and teachers' self-study in the context of lived, relational educational experience (see, for example, Samaras, 2011; Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, Russell, 2004).

I created a "narrative self-study research collage" to represent and engage with a range of data from my teaching in the three courses (Pithouse, 2007, p. 44). The methodological contribution of my thesis was the development and use of this textual collage, which drew on visual and language arts-based approaches to educational research, as an alternative medium for data representation (Eisner, 1997). With the collage, I intended to give a vivid, evocative, multifaceted account of my experience of learning through and from

teaching in the three modules. I saw the collage as a medium through which my reader and I could enter into the particularity and complexity of my experience and open it up for ongoing questioning and meaning-making. I also saw the collage as a medium through which I could cultivate my evolving personal-professional-academic voice.

I borrowed the notion of collage from the visual arts to draw attention to the multidimensional and multifocal nature of processes of representation and meaning-making in dynamic relation to lived experience (Butler-Kisber, 2008). The format of my narrative self-study research collage evolved through many attempts at different forms of narrative representation. In constructing the collage, I used text rather than images; the collage was made up of a collection of narrative pieces of writing through which I both represented *and* engaged with data derived from the field texts (data sources) that were generated through my research. I used a variety of fonts, borders, and colours to signal a connection to the visual arts and to distinguish the text of the collage from the text of the more conventionally written parts of the thesis.

In the collage, I presented themed clusters of narrative portrayals that linked to the points of pedagogic orientation that foreshadowed and underpinned my course design and to the pedagogic priorities that informed this design. I constructed the narrative portrayals in a variety of alternative forms: reflective dialogues, reflections, found poems, dramatic presentations, lived-experience descriptions, and letters. These narrative portrayals were not offered as works of literary merit. Instead, I viewed them as resources for communicating and learning from my lived experience of teaching. The portrayals illustrated significant instances of this experience, as well as my observations and reflections, and students' responses.

In composing the narrative portrayals, I made use of data offered by the array of field texts that were generated through and because of my doctoral research process: a) my learning-teaching-research journal; b) course outlines; c) students' learning-research journals,

written coursework, and module evaluations; and d) audio recordings of class discussions and student presentations. When using excerpts from the field texts in constructing the narrative portrayals, I endeavoured to preserve the meaning, tone, and style of the original wording. However, I did, at some points, make minor changes to the original wording in order to enhance clarity and to facilitate the flow and structure of the narrative portrayals. I also edited some excerpts to make them shorter. At times, I compressed two or more statements by the same person into one statement.

In creating a textual collage, I was using “writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about [my]self and [my] topic” (Richardson, 2003, p. 499). I was aiming to make available a lens through which I, and others who might engage with my work, could “see differently” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2004, p. 331). I anticipated that seeing differently could bring to light possibilities for moving in different directions and for exploring new ways of doing things (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

In the decade since I completed my doctoral thesis, I have read many inventive theses in which visual and language arts-based approaches to qualitative research have been used in alternative forms of data representation. I have also had the privilege of supervising doctoral research that has been designed and represented in a variety of creative formats. However, at the time that I was a doctoral student myself, I had not come across any examples of theses that were similar to the one I wanted to create. Inspired by the reading I had done on alternative forms of data representation, I was feeling my way and playing with design and form. Looking back, I can see how vital it was that I was supported in that extemporary process by my doctoral research supervisor, Professor Relebohile (Lebo) Moletsane.

I was fortunate to have had Lebo as my research supervisor for my two previous degrees and so, over the years, we had built a stable foundation of mutual trust and knowing. Lebo understood my urge to create something unlike the theses that were available in our

university library and she would often reassure me as I struggled to articulate what I wanted to do. I remember how she would say something like, “That sounds interesting. We will learn about it together. You can teach me.” With Lebo in my corner, I felt safe enough to try out and play with ideas and possibilities. I knew that she would never put me down or make me feel inadequate; but at the same time, I trusted that she would gently ask critical questions that would push me to make my work more focused, coherent, and meaningful. Lebo’s steadfast support made all the difference, not just to how I was able to fashion my thesis, but also to the subsequent trajectory of my scholarship.

A distinctive outgrowth of my scholarship over the past decade has been the increasingly multifaceted and extensive exploration of what I have come to characterise as “professional poetic learning” (Pithouse-Morgan, 2017, p. 63). I have worked independently and with others to cultivate a substantive portfolio of work that engages the power of poetic inquiry as a literary arts-based mode for researching and performing professional learning. This work has its roots in my doctoral thesis, where I first explored found poetry.

The idea for using short extracts from field texts to develop found poems came from my reading of Richardson’s (2003) suggestions for “evocative forms” of data representation (pp. 512-517, 528-532) and Butler-Kisber’s (2005) discussion of her use of found poetry as an arts-based form of data representation. In constructing the found poems, I chose extracts that caught my attention because of the ideas that they expressed and the way in which these ideas were communicated. By transforming these extracts into found poems, I hoped to highlight the content and form of the ideas they conveyed and to evoke intellectual *and* emotional responses. Inspired by Butler-Kisber’s (2005) suggestion of constructing “poetry clusters [as a] way of producing a kaleidoscope of essential ideas around [a] narrative theme” (p. 108), I created clusters of short, simple found poems that spoke to the pedagogic priorities that informed my teaching. To illustrate, the following cluster of found poems responds to my

intention to encourage my students to think about their own experiences, viewpoints, and actions in new ways and from different perspectives. I hoped that the study of self could generate new ideas about and for the students' academic and professional practice. This cluster of poems draws attention to some thought-provoking queries and concerns that the students raised about studying themselves as teachers.

<p>What's The point Of self-study? So, You know <i>Your self</i>, So what?</p>	<p>What does <i>Our selves</i> Mean?</p>
<p>Will I Like what I Find in getting To know <i>My self</i>? Will I Be able to Change that Which I Do not like?</p>	<p>How do I Avoid dwelling Too much On <i>self-study</i> And neglecting The learners?</p>
<p>But Now I Wonder how <i>Self-study</i> will Benefit someone Who doesn't want to change, Who believes in <i>him self</i> or <i>her self</i>?</p>	

Figure 1. Found poem cluster: “Questioning *self-study*” (adapted from Pithouse, 2007, p. 110)

Poetry can be viewed as progressing along a continuum. Towards one end might be poetry that can be acknowledged as meeting particular literary and artistic criteria. Near the other end, might be what is produced by tinkering with poetic language and form to facilitate creative and imaginative engagement. From this perspective, the found poems I composed as part of my collage could be characterised as being on the experimental rather than aesthetically pleasing side. And they constituted a very small part of my thesis as a whole. Nevertheless, they served as an entry point for my subsequent poetic professional learning explorations.

Poetic inquiry develops through the generative intersection of the imaginative possibilities of poetic communication and poetic ways of knowing with the stances, practices, and products of qualitative research (Leggo, 2008). The focus of my postdoctoral poetic inquiry has not been on creating poems that exhibit literary proficiency or artistic value; my core emphasis has been on composing poetry for the educative purposes of researching and enhancing professional learning. I have witnessed how researchers and research participants who might not define themselves as “qualified” poets can create quite simple poems as research data, representations, and interpretations (Pithouse-Morgan, Naicker, Pillay, Masinga, & Hlao, 2016; Pithouse-Morgan, Madondo, & Grossi, 2019). Through this work, I have become mindful of how, in contexts such as South Africa, “where lack of access and generative exposure to poetry and other art forms in the actual school curriculum remain a pressing issue of social and cultural injustice, formal qualifications or even practical experience within the literary arts might be more usefully seen as a desirable development rather than as a prerequisite for poetic professional learning” (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019, p. 149).

I have come to understand how, although research poems might not necessarily hold their own as literary texts, they can permeate qualitative research with imagination, feeling,

and sensory impressions, and can enable researchers to portray and interpret lived experiences in order to reimagine and enrich professional learning. Moreover, I have seen how a variety of poetic genres can be used to recognise and embody the uniqueness and diversity of the voices of research participants and researchers. And, I have learnt about how poetry can be used not only to produce and represent qualitative data, but also as an inventive mode of analysis, interpretation, and conceptualisation. Overall, I have experienced how individual and collective poetic professional learning can not only intensify professionals' self-insight and social awareness, but also deepen and extend understandings of professional learning as both phenomenon and process (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, Pithouse-Morgan, Chisanga, Meyiwa, & Timm, 2018; Pithouse-Morgan, & Samaras, 2019).

And so, taken as a whole, what are the implications of this short story of my doctoral journey and my subsequent academic path? For me, this account of my initial entry into poetic professional learning signals the importance of the supervisory voice, not just during the doctoral study itself, but also in the postdoctoral period. My supervisor, Lebo, could have dismissed my fledging attempts at found poetry by saying something like, "Well these poems are just not very good." And although that might have been accurate, it would not have been very helpful for me at that time. Because of Lebo's willingness to allow me to experiment, I was able to create alternative forms of representation that might not have had innate literary or artistic merit, but were still adequate to prompt and exemplify my learning as a novice teacher educator. Those found poems were a beginning. At the time, neither Lebo nor I knew where they would lead.

As a doctoral supervisor now myself, it is useful to be reminded of that formative experience and to be mindful of how my responses to my students' work might not only influence the design of their theses, but also the course of their postdoctoral academic lives and work. For other supervisors, I offer my story as an exemplar of how we might sustain our

students' creative efforts in supportive ways that can allow them to experience a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment without the limiting fear of failure or negative responses.

For doctoral students, I would like to say that, looking back at my thesis, I can see that it was just a starting place, an entry point for my continuing academic adventures. As a child, I loved to read “choose your own adventure” mystery novels where I could experiment with making different choices for the protagonists. Each choice would result in the adventure taking a different turn. I relished the excitement, the sense of stepping into the unknown, and the possibilities of multiple outcomes. What made all the difference for me in my doctoral journey was that, with the wise guidance of my supervisor, I was able to choose to step into the unknown. And so, my adventures continue.

To close this short story, I offer a simple poem, in the traditional Japanese tanka format. The tanka is a concise poetic form, having only one stanza of five lines with a 5/7/5/7/7 syllable count (Poets.org, 2004). Tankas were historically written as private messages between two people (Breckenridge & Clark, 2017). Here, I offer the tanka as public encouragement to doctoral students to take a different turn and step into the unknown, but with the support of wise advisors.

Choosing my own Adventures

With her wise guidance,
Stepping into the unknown.
Possibilities...
Taking a different turn,
My adventures continue.

Figure 2. Tanka poem: “Choosing my own adventures”

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