

# Using Autobiographical Self-Study Methods to Expand New Ways of Knowing Collaborative Writing

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We, two teacher educators and critical friends from the U.S., have been conducting self-study research over the past 12 years. In 2018, we submitted a manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal that was returned to us with a *revise* and *resubmit* invitation. One blind reviewer wrote:

Your discussion following your findings uses the word “we”, which made me wonder if there were no individual differences in your findings or if you somehow negotiated a collective reality? Explaining the use of voice in this section is crucial.

When we returned to our manuscript, we quickly identified the reviewer’s observations, which led us to explain the following:

Due to our deep collaboration, our self-study became a *we-study* as our collective analysis reflects both of our realities. We take on one voice as our collaboration and evidence from the data analysis ended us in the same place of thinking.

However, this required justification did not sit well with us, as one of the hallmarks of self-study already includes collaboration (LaBoskey, 2004). The “we-study” term came to us organically in response to the reviewer’s concern, but led us to take a closer look at the literature on collaborative

writing and others' use of related terms. Although we could not find any self-study scholars who have used the exact term, "we-study", a few have explored and written to similar notions. For example, Davey, et al. (2011) offered the term "we-identity" to illuminate how collaborative-collective self-study of teacher education practices feeds not only into our personal identities, but also the "body of commonalities among us" (p. 198) that constitutes us as a community of professionals—a we. And more recently, Olan and Edge (2018) examined their critical friendship, finding that through collaboration, "Our positionality as researchers is better informed; it is transformed. I am not a one, but a part of we" (p. 324). Discovering that other self-study scholars have been perplexed with this paradox between *self* and *we*, beyond just a grammar issue, we asked: How do we collectively navigate the *we* and *self* in our writing as co-authors over time? How has our collaborative voice developed over the years? How does our interactive inquiry into collaborative writing lead us to deeper understandings of this phenomenon? Our overall aim is to describe how we used autobiographical self-study methods to expand what collaborative writing means to us and how it can inform other collaborative scholars.

## Literature Review

We recognize our study is already positioned in a robust line of inquiry that offers many definitions of collaborative writing and overlaps between various terms from multiple disciplines such as cooperative writing, co-authored scholarship, community of writers, and collaborative writing as a method of inquiry (Dale 1997; Day & Eodice, 2001; Ede & Lunsford 1990; Gale & Bowstead, 2013; Harris, 1992; Kent et al., 2017; Rogers & Horton, 1992; Wyatt et al., 2018).

With that, many nuances are discussed about collaborative writing, such as authors seeking to understand authorship order, disputes around fairness, and ethics of co-authoring (Albert & Wager, 2003; Smith & Williams-Jones, 2012). Additionally, scholars offer commentaries and philosophical insight to characterize different theories of how authors, texts, and meaning are co-constructed (Gale & Wyatt, 2017; Dale 1997; Ede & Lunsford 1990; Wyatt et al., 2018). Some even express the difficulty of collaboration given how it is "charged both cognitively and emotionally" (John-Steiner, 2006, p. 124).

We came to resonate with Harris' (1992) perspective on collaborative writing "as involving two or more writers working together to produce a joint product . . . Each may take responsibility for a portion of the final text, [but must take] some sort of collective responsibility for the final product" (p. 369). We appreciated the idea of "collective responsibility" as this indicated to us joint accountability of thoughts and words expressed. Storch (2019) builds on this saying collaborative writing is an activity that requires the co-authors to be involved in all stages of the writing process, sharing the responsibility for and the ownership of the entire text produced. Building on that, we looked to Gale and Bowstead (2013) who used collaborative writing as a method of inquiry where they could engage in exploratory thinking and nurture new and developing ideas.

Although we found a substantial number of studies that focus on understanding collaborative writing as a topic (Day & Eodice, 2001), we agree with Yancy and Spooner (1998) that just because individuals compose together, "we still seem to know precious little about how this joint composing is being managed, about the processes that goes into collaborative writing" (p.46). Although this was stated over 20 years ago, few studies exist, even today, addressing this particular area. Some seminal pieces from Davey et al. (2010, 2011) and Cetar et al. (2012) have broken ground in the self-study field, offering insight into the trust needed in working as multiple authors. Additionally, Davey et al.

(2011) share a *continuum of collaboration in self-study* that identifies the various forms of collaboration. This continuum stands to illustrate and unpack the dynamic and complex interactions within collaborative inquiries. Our current self-study, and previous self-studies, seem to be examples of “co-formative collaboration” (p. 71). Our inquiry topics have always been common and collectively determined, yet we consistently used writing as a method of inquiry to explore understandings, similar to Gale and Bowstead (2013). For this particular study, we looked to examine our 12-year body of work as co-authors. Given the lack of research on the intersection of self-study and collaborative co-authorship, this study seeks to fill this gap.

## Theoretical Perspectives

To engage in this work, we looked to both liminality and the rhizomatic theory for perspectives that we acknowledge have some similarities, yet nuanced differences. Liminality, derived from the Latin term *limen*, means threshold. Van Gennep (1909) describes thresholds as phases individuals go through in rites of passage—the act of becoming. The *preliminal* stage involves a metaphorical “death”, while the *liminal* stage implies an actual passing through the threshold. In the *postliminal* stage, a new identity is embraced.

With our understandings of liminality, we leaned into the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) with their notions of the rhizome as a thinking-tool that captures the multiplicities and interconnections that shape, and give meaning to, liminality and our collaborative writing engagements. To Turner (1969), liminal individuals, people in the transition phase, are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (pp. 94–95). That is, liminality suggests a fluid moving beyond, offering us a perspective by which to view our collaborative journey. Just as a rhizome has no beginning or end, and can be entered from many different points, all of which connect to each other, this metaphor helped us think in multiple ways about the ambiguity and complexity within the liminal process by which we became collaborative authors (Osberg, et al, 2008).

To that end, we drew on three rhizomatic concepts used by Ovens, et al. (2016)— *assemblage*, *becoming*, and *lines of flight*—to make sense of our own journey. Assemblages denote the layering of the relationally interconnected parts of reality, which increase the dimensions of multiplicity, and ultimately change the reality as these connections expand and develop. Becoming assemblages enter into relationships and highlight reality as multiplicity (Strom & Martin, 2013). *Becoming* is a process of creative transformation within the assemblage in which something qualitatively different emerges (Semetsky, 2008). Becoming recognizes the interconnectedness of our reality and the process of transformation for that reality. Finally, although mechanisms generally bind the functioning of assemblages to the status quo, “there is always something that flows or flees” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 216), escaping from the norm. Lines of flight offer movement from one place to another—taking thinking in another direction that can be novel, or unconventional. “Rhizomes exist in a subterranean sense but [they] pop nodes up all over the place and those nodes can be seen to represent new ideas, new ways of thinking, new affects, new ethical sensitivities or whatever” (Gale & Bowstead, 2013, p. 3). Lines of flight embrace these deviations.

## Methods

To answer our research questions, we collected “biographical data” and used the 14 guidelines for autobiographical self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 16). In this, we served as critical friends

(Schuck & Russell, 2005) to ensure trustworthiness, taking up the roles of close friend, insider, expert, fully involved, and productive from the *Critical Friend Definition Continuum* (Stolle, et al., 2019). For background, we met in 2002 during our doctoral studies, and have been formally collaborating since 2007 even though we moved to different universities. To answer our research questions (see introduction), our biographical data included: (a) written dialogue exchanges, (b) audio-recorded conversations, (c) and research artifacts (our body of collaborative publications). The first two data sources were collected over a three-month period of time. The written exchanges started as an opportunity to reflect and re-examine how we navigated the *we* and *self* in our collaborative writing over time.

Each written dialogue reflected our thinking and questioning, thus affording us a unique opportunity to generate newly collected data while discussing research artifacts, also referred to as “secondary sources of evidence” (AERA, 2006, p. 65). These secondary sources included our previously co-authored research publications and presentations (Frambaugh-Kritzer & Stolle, 2019, 2016, 2014, 2012, 2011, 2007; Stolle, et al., 2019, 2018; Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2014, 2013) and became the central focus of our written conversations, assisting us in making the familiar/commonplace strange/new again.

To analyze the data, we first took up “writing is a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis” (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). We came to understand our previous research artifacts in new ways as we wrote and dialogued about them, situating them within the body of literature on collaborative writing. This method also allowed us to re-envision our former collaborations through multiple lenses as we pushed each other’s thinking. For further rigor, we assigned codes to the data based on our theoretical frame: (1) *assemblage*, (2) *becoming*, and (3) *lines of flight* (Ovens et al., 2016). Next, we determined the relationships between the codes and the stories the data told, arriving with the following findings: (a) time connects, (b) I becomes we, and (c) we feeds into you.

To articulate our findings, and to honor the autobiographical goal of connecting readers to our themes, we diverged slightly from traditional formatting to represent our discursive and reflective thinking processes in a transparent manner (AERA, 2006). That is, we: (1) use italics for our data-generating voices displayed through our written correspondences, and (2) write our data-analyzing voices according to the strict rules of the 7th Edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) (2019). As we share the raw data exemplars, we followed two particular guidelines from Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) for autobiographical self- study methods:

- *Edited conversations or correspondence must have coherence and structure that provide argumentation and convincing evidence and contain complication or tension.*
- *Correspondence should provide the reader with an inside look at participants’ thinking and feeling.*

And, in responding to the data, we unfold each finding and situate it within the literature to address our research questions, with the goal of making our data transparent.

## Outcomes

### *Time Connects*

**From: Charlotte; Sent: Aug. 22, 2019; To: Elizabeth.** *After our many years of writing together, it's hard to even remember who exactly brought many of the ideas to the table first. But in some cases, I can recall vividly. For example, in our recent 2019 publication, I recall you first discovered the notion of 'dual cognitive processes'. I fully recognized you as an individual doing the hard thinking about how this could relate to our paper. Once you did, together we massaged and made more meaning of this concept. And I eventually felt equal ownership...So I wonder when you re-read that paper, do you recognize your individual offerings? I recall offering the notion of 'symphonic thinking' to our 2014 publication...I see the need for some selfish moments, but in the end, the depth we both put into this was collective.*

**From: Elizabeth; Sent: Aug. 27, 2019; To: Charlotte.** *Although I can identify contributions I make, I don't believe that these identifications make our work any less collaborative. That is, as we socially construct knowledge, theory tells us we build on each other's ideas. So, where my idea may begin, we can't tell where it ends as we interact and reflect together. In bringing forth a concept, I wasn't an authority on the concept.*

*Rather, I simply suggested this could work, but only in collaboration with you did it start to make sense and mesh with our ideas . . . we needed each other, an assemblage with the entwining of our ideas, to make sense of the concept.*

Examining our written exchanges through the lens of rhizomatic theory helped us not only recognize ourselves as an *assemblage*, but also analyze how the amount of time and experience together bonded us and enhanced our interconnectedness. In the exemplar above, we recognized the individual contributions we made to conceptualize our work, but in time, moving from one study to the next, we eventually felt equal ownership of the shared concepts.

Thus, our collaborative voice has developed over our journey as researchers we offer options/ideas with which to play and explore, and together we massage these to establish new ways of knowing. As highlighted in the written exchange above, we resonated with an idea Olan and Edge (2018) articulated, "I am not a one, but a part of we. As we walk side-by-side, our arms extend and our hands meet, and, as if we had choreographed the moment—our fingers intertwine to embrace the essence of critical friendship" (p. 324). Their critical friendship is reminiscent of our collaborative writing partnership. We work together, side-by-side, extending out ideas, dreams, and possibilities that we then take up, explore, and embrace, thus becoming an intertwining of meanings and thought.

This metaphor of walking side-by-side and intertwining our ideas and biographies only works because of our shared history as co-researchers and our personal relationship with each other, meeting in our doctoral program and then continuing to work together despite immense geographical distances once we both settled into faculty positions that connected us over time. Ovens et al. (2016) identified the importance of shared biographies that require a continuing dialogical conversation. In analyzing the data, we identified how our shared history and friendship added to the quality of our research and highlighted us as an assemblage. Specifically, we noted particular phrases that marked reflection on this interconnectedness such as: *remember when, you know me, and didn't you say once*. For example, Charlotte was unpacking ideas around single authorship and multiple authors and wrote: "You know me, I don't watch or attend sports. I'm in a competitive world, but I fight it all the time,

which is why I'm drawn to collaboration." However, we also see the ambiguity and complexity of this journey, as tension exists between ownership versus the offering of an idea. In these instances, we experience the in-between while moving through the stages of liminality. Thus, the start and ending of oneself is obscured as an assemblage starts to *become*.

## **I Becomes We**

**From: Elizabeth; Sent: Aug. 15, 2019; To: Charlotte.** *In Wyatt et al. (2018), they connect liminality with collaborative writing. I used this concept of liminality with colleagues when talking about ourselves moving from classroom teacher to teacher educator. Liminality refers to when participants "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way—a coming into. So, in regards to our writing, I think we have moved beyond the "liminal stage" as writing collaborators because we no longer act as individual authors; instead, our identity is new and tied to each other. This idea of 'new identity' fascinates me because two authors, Gibson & Graham, collapsed their names into a composite authorial name and sometimes used a first-person "I" . . . they are known as J. K. Gibson-Graham. And, what is so sweet is that even after one of them passed away, the other continued writing with this pen name because "many of the things I'm thinking and talking about still feel like a conversation with Julie".*

**From: Charlotte; Sent: Aug. 16, 2019; To: Elizabeth.** *That is sweet. I love that Gibson & Graham collapsed their names. I recall how badly I wanted us to do this in our 2014 publication for all the reasons Gibson-Graham makes the case. But, I retreated out of fear because I was pre-tenure. The institution wanted me to list individual percentages of contributions in my CV. Writing 50% and 50% just frustrates me because we both work 100%. That said, being in a culture of individualism creates fear and holds me back. Still, I agree, when you wrote "...we have passed through a liminal space where 'we' emerges." Now that Gibson & Graham paved the way, should we re-visit this idea? And I will add, we are post-tenure now.*

We highlighted these written exchanges to best exemplify the transformation that occurred within us as authors. In navigating the *we* and *self*, or our assemblage, in our writing over time, we see our own transformation. That is, as collaborative authors whose interconnectedness expanded and grew, we passed through a *preliminal* stage that left our individual selves behind. The *liminal* stage marked an in-between space of transformation from being individual authors to the becoming of something new. Within this multiplicity of self and we, we identify the *postliminal* stage where we began living with the new identity—no longer acting as individual authors. Instead, our identity is new, interconnected, and tied to each other.

As we looked back on our writing relationship, this idea of becoming, or the taking up of a new we-identity (Davey, et al., 2011), emerged within our original collaborations. That is, we explored the possibility of developing a penname in 2014 (e.g. Stolleframbaugh or Frambaughstolle). However, with one of us being untenured at the time, we were unsure how that would situate us within the field. Yet, when we learned two renowned researchers, Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson collapsed their names into a composite authorial name to become J.K. Gibson-Graham, we can see their relationship passing through the liminal space (e.g. using first-person "I"). We too see in our data that we no longer exist in our writing as individuals, but rather we write in a space where "we" resides. Yet, even though "I became we" for us, we remain conflicted to collapse our names given the institutional barriers we still face.

We recognize tensions have existed throughout our journey, yet mostly spurred by institutional

traditions of authorship and productivity. We have navigated these tensions along the way, such as taking turns in first authorship. We have also based our decisions on funding requirements (i.e., funds for travel only granted to first author) or tenure/promotion expectations (i.e., explanation of contributions if not first author). Based on these tensions, we often felt limited to exercise lines of flight.

## **We Feeds into You**

**From: Charlotte; Sent: Sept. 22, 2019; To: Elizabeth.** *Self-study methods require us to better understand our teaching practice or other complex issues facing teacher educators. In our case, one of self-study's hallmarks is collaboration. Munby and Russell (1994) provided a theoretical frame that they referred to as 'authority of position' and the 'authority of experience'. I now realize when it comes to collaborative writing, we have a lot 'authority of experience' given our body of collaborative work. Yet, now that we are digging into the literature, I realize I have no 'authority of position' as I read the trailblazers like Wyatt & Gale, Gibson-Graham, etc ...Like you, I'm trying to wrap my mind around Deleuze and nomadic ideas and I feel challenged...because I'm not an authority.*

**From: Elizabeth; Sent: Sept. 24, 2019; To: Charlotte.** *I 100% agree that we have no position of authority on collaborative writing, as we are new in the literature, not publishing in this field. But, we do hold a position of authority on critical friendship, which is a form of collaboration . . . Still, we do hold 'authority of experience' from our years of work.*

*As I look back on our writings, I see us always writing as 'we'. The only time we ever diverge from 'we' is if we explain a nuance or specific context unique to one of us or to identify where a particular data point originated. That is, we teach in unique contexts (and reviewers have asked us to describe these contexts in some of our publications), yet we often see our contexts as similar because of who we are and the theories by which we teach.*

These excerpts, as well as the other data exemplars, continue to highlight the tensions we grappled with in regards to authority and academic publishing expectations. Our philosophical discussions in this interactive inquiry helped us develop a more complex understanding of collaborative writing, not only for ourselves, but also for the field. And, this complex understanding included a deeper look at what happens within a collaborative relationship in the self-study context, while also offering lines of flight that might move us as individuals, and as a field, to new ways of thinking about academic writing and collaboration.

Lines of flight describe those variations from the status quo that break through the cracks in a system of control and form unpredictable offshoots (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). One offshoot we identified through the examination of our work was our new appreciation of how Davey, et al.'s (2011) "we-identity" (p. 198) can grow, build, and legitimize our field. That is, we understand academic expectations often stifle, or discourage collaboration, valuing single authorship. However, we now recognize the multiplicity of our realities, as we are all assemblages together, becoming new transformations that offer opportunities for divergence and novelty. Our new understandings offer freedom to embrace our 'authority of experience' (Munby & Russell, 1994) and make bold claims that can impact ourselves and our field.

Additionally, our raw data showed we often mentioned Fleck's (1935/1979) notions of Thought Collective—discovery of new epistemological cognition should be situated within the greater environment of knowledge. That is, knowledge creation is a social practice dependent on a shared

framework. By situating our individual discoveries about collaborative writing within the community of interacting researchers, we met the purposes of self-study—to grow the individual while growing the field. However, more importantly, we felt confident in our own thinking, as we tangibly saw how it fit within the collective, thus empowering us to engage in lines of flight.

## Implications

This autobiographical self-study grew our understandings of collective writing in new ways. Using liminality and rhizomatic perspectives to uncover new themes and insights for the field, we recognized it was the gift of time within our assemblage and becoming that afforded us this unique perspective. Based on our findings and growth, we offer two implications for teacher education.

First, this interactive inquiry into ourselves as collaborative writers afforded us opportunities to uncover that we indeed went through a metaphorical "death" within our partnership (preliminal stage), no longer acting as individual authors. And as we passed through the threshold of the *liminal* stage, marking the boundary between individual and collaborative authors, we now embrace the *postliminal* stage—our new identity. Thus, we now identify that our use of "we-study" (the impetus to this study) was appropriate, and we feel more confident in offering this term to the literature, perhaps as a line of flight. Due to this finding, we can now better articulate our collaboration and feel empowered to report our co-authored work without percentages or fear of being second author—allowing us to pursue a line of flight from the university neoliberal procedures. However, we recognize not all collaborative self-studies will be "we-studies" as each should be negotiated by the individuals/assemblages involved. Not everyone will agree with the "we-study" term. Even still, we desire to hear other co-authors tell their "we-story".

Second, being the critical friends we are, we asked each other some tough questions during data collection surrounding notions of individualism and collectivism. We dug in, inviting tension. But the longevity of our collaborative relationship afforded us the context in which to do this digging, and ultimately to expand our knowledge of collaborative writing in new ways. Again, if it was not for the blind reviewer's question we introduced in the introduction, we would not have started this new inquiry. We exercised a line of flight to disregard the blind reviewer's comment, which brought about an explicit awareness and acceptance of what it actually took to grow over time as co-authors—to become the *we*. We honor these notions in our work and suggest other collaborative scholars consider how they can invite discomfort and struggle with complex ideas to both grow themselves as a 'we-study' in the field.

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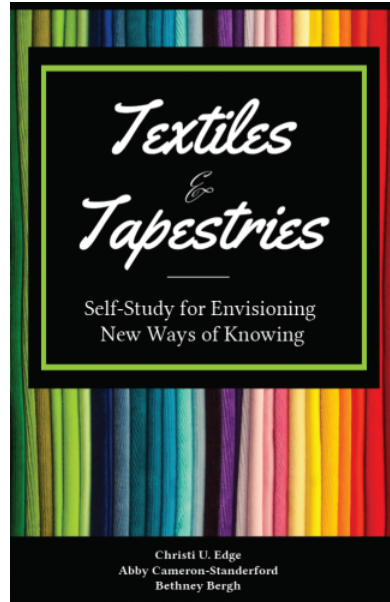
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