

"Well, It's Also about Me and My History"

Learning about Myself as a Relational Teacher Educator through Poetic and Dialogic Self-Study

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I am a white South African woman who was born and grew up during apartheid. I qualified as a language teacher in 1995, the year after South Africa's first democratic elections. 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, qualified to teach many different subjects in schools and higher education institutions. Some are full-time students who have recently completed undergraduate degrees, and others are experienced practicing teachers who are studying part-time.

The majority of students at our university have a low annual family income. Most of the students and staff would have been racially classified as African or Indian during apartheid. The apartheid state enforced racial classifications to stratify South African society. Central to this stratification was a racially segregated education system calculated to advantage the white minority and disadvantage the majority of South Africans (Christie, 1991).

My scholarship is in professional learning, focusing on the educative value of teachers originating and leading in their learning to enhance their ongoing development, in collaboration with others (Easton, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). Because of my mindfulness of the miseducative apartheid legacy of social and educational marginalisation and segregation, I work with my students to read, write, and share personal history stories as a vital component of their professional learning. The emphasis is on "personal history as those formative, contextualized experiences that have influenced teachers' thinking about teaching and their own practice" (Samaras et al., 2004, p. 909).

Aims

The stimulus for the self-study presented in this chapter was a recent university teaching portfolio in which I had to declare my pedagogic values. In the portfolio, I highlighted "dialogue and interaction within an open and supportive educational environment in which students and I can learn about, from, and with each other." Composing the teaching portfolio made me aware that I wanted to enhance my understanding of what this statement could mean. The teaching portfolio required me to use evidence from anonymous student module evaluations to illustrate the enactment and impact of my pedagogic values. And so, in the preliminary phase of my self-study, I asked, "*What can I learn from my students' module evaluations about dialogue and interaction within an open and supportive educational environment?*"

I communicated my response to this initial question in the proposal I submitted in September 2019 for the 2020 Castle Conference. Feedback on the proposal from two anonymous peer reviewers pushed me to move further in my self-study by inviting two colleagues as "critical friends" (Schuck &

Russell, 2005) to help me gain alternative perspectives and think through possible responses to the reviewers' comments and questions. My research question evolved through dialogic engagement with the peer review feedback and the contributions of my critical friends. Hence, in the second phase of my self-study, I asked, "*What can I learn about myself as a relational teacher educator through dialogue and interaction with others?*" In positioning myself as an aspiring *relational teacher educator*, I am drawing on the seminal self-study scholarship of Kitchen (2002), who coined the term "relational teacher education...to describe open and collaborative relationships in which teacher educators and their students develop deeper understandings of classroom practice and sensitivity to the milieus in which each lives and works" (p. 36). For this chapter, I am working with an understanding of *relational teacher education* in which the "open and collaborative relationships" include relationships with others who serve as critical friends, such as my two colleagues and the peer reviewers of my proposal.

In this chapter, I offer a sequential account of the two phases of my self-study. First, I present the Method and Outcomes sections of my initial proposal in which I engaged poetically with my students' written descriptions in anonymous module evaluations of what they valued about our dialogue and interaction. To follow, I relate the second phase of my self-study, in which I responded to the peer review feedback on my proposal with the assistance of my two critical friends. For the second phase, I present three interconnected dialogue pieces, based on conversations with my critical friends and the peer review feedback. Drawing on Mishler's (1990) notion of trustworthiness, I explicate my poetic and dialogic self-study process to serve as a methodological resource for others interested in ways of knowing that are inspired by the literary arts.

Phase One: The Proposal

Method

Poetic inquiry entails using poetic language and methods as research devices, thus infusing research with the imaginative possibilities of poetic ways of knowing (Leggo, 2008). I used poetic inquiry to engage with my students' written descriptions of what they valued about our dialogue and interaction. To begin, I went back to anonymous written student evaluations of my university teaching over recent years (2012-2018) to look at what I could learn from my students concerning my self-study question. Building on a method developed in previous poetic inquiries (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, 2017, 2019), I copied and pasted relevant extracts verbatim from the student evaluations into a new document, which extended to four pages of dense text. I read and reread this composite text to colour code words and phrases that expressed what students seemed to value most about our *dialogue and interaction* (see, for example, Figure 1).

Figure 1

A section of the composite text made of words and phrases from student evaluations

Interacting with other participants. Everything was clearly explained and it was made comfortable. Always looked forward to my Wednesday sessions as they were always welcoming and we were all treated the same which really boosted my confidence. Our lecturer was always willing to assist in every way she could, with a smile on her face. I enjoyed the sessions because of her professionalism, her down to earth approach and the way she interacted with the students. I am inspired. We had a healthy relationship. Lecturer has an ability to make you to look forward to the next contact session. Open communication, receptive, sensitive to the needs of everyone very approachable and accommodating. Very professional and friendly. A great relationship. Professional and courteous. Lecturer ensured students had necessary notes. Lecturer ensured she found out how everyone's day was. Lecturer followed up with emails & text messages. Would like to thank you for all the hard work and being patient with us, you have proved that you have passion for what you do. I am really thankful and am a totally different person – inspired, motivated and full of knowledge. Showed respect for our/my work. The feedback that was given was always so helpful and encouraging to do better on my assignments. I felt comfortable receiving the information she passed on. Facilitation of discussion was easy/pleasant. She always listened attentively and avoided any heated discussions. Always controlled pace/tone. Often with insight and humour. Lecturer was understanding when personal situations impeded student time schedules for lectures & hand in dates. She kept a good relationship with the group. There was an open gate for communication. I felt that I could always be honest with any issues I had. Awesome, friendly, caring, accommodating. Humble helpful. We had a very relationship with our lecturer. She always kept in touch with us. Very professional all the time. She was delightful. Always patient, polite

From the colour-coded words and phrases, I distinguished five verbs that seemed to capture what the students valued most: *comfort*; *encourage*; *inspire*; *respect*; *understand*. To stimulate my thinking, I looked up the historical development of each verb's meaning in an etymological dictionary. I made a note of the entry for each word, then went back and highlighted phrases that I found intriguing. To illustrate, for *understand*, I highlighted the Old English literal meaning of "stand in the midst of" (understand, n.d.). And for *inspire*, I chose "to fill (the mind, heart, etc., with grace, etc.)" and "blow into, breathe upon" (inspire, n.d.).

Next, I pasted together a list of the highlighted phrases. I then played with these phrases to compose a found poem (Butler-Kisber, 2005). Over several months, I arranged and rearranged fragments of the highlighted phrases, trying out poems in a variety of formats. I moulded and reshaped the fragments until I felt that I had arrived at a piece that portrayed an expressive response to my guiding question.

Outcomes

The poem took shape in the tanka format, which is a form of Japanese poetry traditionally relayed as a personal message between two people (Breckenridge & Clark, 2017). From my perspective, this tanka, "Breathe With Us," serves as an appreciative response to the student evaluations. It is also an evocative reminder of what I value and wish to cultivate in my professional practice.

Breathe With Us

Stand in the midst, breathe
Into the presence of grace.
Look back with purpose,
Grasp courage when grief is close.
Breathe upon, among, with us.

The first line of the tanka, “Stand in the midst, breathe,” reminds me of how connected I feel when I begin a class with my students by standing together in a circle with our eyes closed, taking deep, slow breaths. By consciously breathing together, we come into each other’s presence and prepare ourselves for a relational learning experience.

“Into the presence of grace” has connotations of compassion and heightened understanding of self and others. It signals the importance of a pedagogic culture in which teachers, students, and teacher educators feel able and comfortable to communicate openly and sensitively about lived educational and personal experiences.

“Look back with purpose,” reminds me of why I facilitate personal history self-study with students. My pedagogic purpose is to invite and support students to extend their professional learning as teachers by retracing and re-examining personal stories of the past and re-envisioning hopeful stories for the future.

“Grasp courage when grief is close”—in supporting and witnessing my students’ personal history self-study, I have noted that although many heart-warming experiences are shared, distressing memories tend to emerge more readily (e.g., Pithouse, 2011; Pithouse-Morgan, 2016). In discussing this with students, we have reflected on the significance of painful personal experiences in our lives and work and in relation to conscientiously fulfilling our professional responsibilities to the children we serve, as schoolteachers and as those who support the work of schoolteachers (Guilfoyle et al., 1997).

Finally, in considering the line, “Breathe upon, among, with us,” I am mindful that, as a teacher educator, an understanding of learning and teaching as relational and dialogic places a particular ethical responsibility on me to cultivate attentive, responsive relationships with and among my students. It also necessitates a conscientious awareness of how my words and actions form living exemplars for my students, who are nurturing relationships in their classrooms.

Phase Two: Moving Further with the Help of Critical Friends

Method

In this section of the chapter, I attend to my reworked research question, “*What can I learn about myself as a relational teacher educator through dialogue and interaction with others?*” This revised question was inspired by a comment from one of the peer reviewers of my proposal:

Reviewer B: Although the author reflexively engaged with her students via written teacher evaluations, interaction with text may be limiting. Engaging in collaborative dialogue with critical friends in addition to the interaction with text would move the inquiry to a deeper level and improve trustworthiness.

I invited two fellow teacher educators, Makie Kortjass and Vusi Msiza, to be my critical friends. Makie and Vusi are early career academics and doctoral candidates at my university. Makie lectures in early childhood education and Vusi in curriculum studies. They are both members of our local self-study research group. I have longstanding working relationships with both of them. As Makie and Vusi were also working on papers for the Castle conference, I suggested that we could reciprocally mentor each other in developing our work. We shared our proposals and the reviewer feedback via email and then met for two quite extensive audio-recorded conversations (in December 2019 and January 2020).

I listened to and transcribed our discussions of my self-study. With permission from Makie and Vusi, I created a sequence of dialogue pieces to communicate my learning interactively. As a literary device, dialogue can demonstrate how character and plot development occurs through interaction between protagonists (Coulter & Smith, 2009). My use of dialogue is rooted in the work of researchers who have employed dialogue as a creative, analytical practice to deepen and represent their professional learning through self-study (e.g., East et al., 2009).

The dialogue pieces that follow are composed of lightly edited excerpts from the transcripts of my conversations with Makie and Vusi and the peer review feedback on my proposal. As I was transcribing, I made notes about my thinking. I clustered fragments of the transcripts together and slowly reshaped these to create three interconnected dialogue pieces. The first two dialogue pieces, based on my initial conversation with Makie and Vusi, are followed by a brief reflective interlude. Then I present the third dialogue piece, based on our second conversation.

Outcomes

Dialogue Piece One: “In a way, they are taking care of me.”

Reviewer A: I’m curious about if or how the researcher might address or make sense of student feedback that is/was not affirming—feedback that might point to relationship dynamics that were strained or unproductive.

Kathleen: When I was putting together all the comments from years of module evaluations—the comments that talked about relationships in the classroom— what I realised is that the students never made any negative or critical comments about our relationships. And, I thought, “Well, but the reviewers are going to say—and I would say it myself— “This all sounds very rosy, but what about the negative comments?”

Vusi: So, from 2012-2018, nothing negative?

Makie: No, but the students don’t usually talk much about relationships; they focus on the module, what they learnt.

Kathleen: But, you see, in my case, the students *did* talk quite a lot about relationships. But they never made any comments about relationships that were negative or critical or even saying how they could be improved. They did make comments about how the *modules* could be improved, such as, “We could have had more of this or less of that.”

Makie: So, the comments about relationships *are there*. Just not the negative.

Kathleen: The *negative* is not there. But that doesn’t mean that I think that’s because our relationships are always perfect. It can’t be possible that every student—and these are hundreds of students—always had a good experience in terms of relationships in my classroom. So, that’s where I was hoping that you two could help me, as critical friends, to think about this. You know, having been students and still being students yourself, what could be some of the reasons why students wouldn’t talk about this?

Vusi: It’s a difficult one. OK, for me, as a student, in instances where I didn’t write anything negative, I didn’t want to discourage the lecturer. Because I could see, especially when you compare, I thought, “OK, you can see that *this one* is putting in the effort, and I can see the difference from where I was and where I am currently.” So, I wouldn’t want to discourage him or her.

Makie: I want to support what Vusi is saying. I think that’s what some students feel. I remember I was talking to one student, one of *your* students, a student who doesn’t usually put in too much effort. And this student was saying, “You know, I *have* to do this.” I think you gave them some task or assignment. And she said, “I *have* to do this. I *cannot* disappoint her.”

[Everyone laughs]

Makie: So, you know, as a student, if there is a lecturer who you think has that passion for the students and the work, then, if there is maybe one minor negative, you can just let it go.

Kathleen: And, I also don’t know if race comes into it. Whether there’s some dynamic like, “This white person is trying so hard, let’s give her a break!”

[Everyone laughs]

Vusi: Yeah—You just reminded me of something else, that quite often students view the module evaluation as punitive or rewarding. I think that because they were happy about the sessions, they decided to reward you with all the positives. Because, I remember, in my undergraduate studies, when we were not satisfied, we said, “OK, it’s fine, we’ll *get you* in the evaluations!”

[Everyone laughs]

Vusi: So, I think they then decided to reward you and leave out other things.

Kathleen: So, there could be that part of not wanting to discourage me or disappoint me. In a way, because relationships are very emotional, *they are taking care of me*.

Dialogue Piece Two: “I feel it’s the most important thing that I’m doing.”

Vusi: But, I want to go back to the module evaluation form. Is there a section where it says, “How can the relationships be improved?”

Kathleen: Interestingly, the prescribed module evaluation questions don't ask about relationships. And, in terms of what needs to be improved, my students don't talk about relationships, they only talk about the module. But, somehow, in the written answers to "What aspects of the module were facilitated well?" or "Any other comments?" my students do—

Makie: —bring in the relationships. So, no question is specific to relationships—

Kathleen: —but the students bring it in. This is interesting because it shows that it's *important to them*.

Reviewer A: But, are there circumstances in which harmony cannot or should not be maintained? And how is this work gendered and/or reifying gender expectations?

Kathleen: Is it always necessary to have a harmonious relationship? Is that me *as a woman* feeling like I should take care of my students? But then, I think those traditionally "feminine qualities" of caring and relational teaching should be in every classroom. And the issue of having harmonious relationships—yes, sometimes, you do want to disrupt. But I think, for me, it is particularly because of all the personal history work I do with my students. It is because I understand *now*—which I didn't know initially when I started as a teacher educator—how many students have had what I would call traumatic schooling experiences. So, I think I'm always very aware of that, and I try to be sensitive to that in my teaching. I try to create a safe, containing space because of the experiences I have learnt about over the years. And now, I know that *I never know* what students are bringing with them into the classroom. So, I think for me, it has more to do with my understanding of South African histories, which might be different from other contexts.

Makie: So, that's your answer. It's not because you are a woman—well, maybe—but because of the work that you have been doing on personal history and the things that were coming up about what the students have experienced. So, now, you are more aware, and you want to create that harmonious relationship.

Kathleen: I suppose I put a lot of effort and energy into that because I feel *it's the most important thing that I'm doing*.

Makie: And you are also ploughing the seeds so that the students can do it with their learners.

A Reflective Interlude

In reconsidering my first conversation with Makie and Vusi, I became conscious that, as much as I talked about my desire to enact relational teacher education as being a response to "*what students are bringing with them into the classroom*," my emphasis on it as "*the most important thing that I'm doing*" might well be rooted in my personal history. This led me to go back to an (as yet unpublished) personal history self-study piece I have been working on that centres on a diary from my childhood. By working with the diary as a personal history artefact, I have been piecing together a story of my childhood experiences related to my father's terminal illness and death 36 years ago. And I have been exploring possible influences of these childhood experiences— especially concerning my schooling experiences—on my pedagogic values and practice as a teacher educator.

In the period between our first and second conversations, in an email to Makie and Vusi, I shared

some of this thinking and an excerpt from my writing about my childhood diary. Here, I present a small section of the excerpt I sent to Makie and Vusi:

Despite all the material and academic resources of the school I attended as a white middle-class girl, such as a swimming pool, sports fields, a library, and so on, as far as I know, there was no school counsellor or psychologist. I have no memories of talking with anyone during that year to share my confusing feelings about my father's illness or death, and there is nothing in the diary to suggest that I did so. From what I remember, my school life carried on as if nothing had happened. Here, I found resonance with my students' descriptions of deep silences and shadows that marked their childhoods and extended into adulthood.

This then served as a prompt for my second conversation with Makie and Vusi, represented below.

Dialogue Piece Three: "Well, it's also about me and my history."

Vusi: Are you making the point that now, as a teacher educator, you have started to realise that *dialogue and interaction*—are you maybe saying that this is something that you didn't experience as a child? That you decided to write in your diary because you never had anyone to listen to you?

Kathleen: I think you've expressed that nicely. In the proposal, when I was writing about relational pedagogy, it was about *me* taking care of my students and *me* creating an open and dialogic learning atmosphere. But in our conversation, what I realised is, maybe, it's just as much about *them taking care of me* as it is about *me taking care of them*. That was my first realisation. And the second realisation was that I was saying, "Well, it's *because of them*, and *their experiences*, often what *I see* as traumatic experiences, that I feel we need to have this very *caring, safe* environment." Then when I thought about it more, I thought, "Well, it's also about *me* and *my history*." So, even though my schooling was much more privileged than most of my students in terms of resources and materials, it also was constrained—in the sense that there was no one to talk to when I had a traumatic experience in my own life. But, I was focusing *on the students*. I was saying, "I'm doing this *for them* because of *their histories*."

Vusi: Yeah

Kathleen: But, perhaps, I'm doing it just as much *for me* because of *my history*. And, when I thought I was taking care of *them*, *they* were also taking care of *me*. And the other thing that came up when I was doing some reading about this (Rumyantseva et al., 2019; Sanders, 2019), is how important it is to acknowledge the *resilience* of our students. So, even though, many of them might have had what *I think* are traumatic experiences, the fact that they even made it to higher education means that they are remarkably resilient because they've come through so many challenges. I have to *acknowledge* that resilience and the capacity that they bring with them, just as much as their vulnerabilities.

Vusi: I think it's very clear now.

Implications

One of my long-term research collaborators, Anastasia Samaras, often says that critically constructive feedback from others in self-study is a "gift." And I repeat this sage advice regularly to my students

and colleagues. But sometimes, such feedback does not feel like a gift that I want to open, because it pushes me to go beyond my comfort zone. Through critically collaborative conversations and reflection (Samaras, 2011), I have become more mindful that, as a teacher educator, I am comfortable in the role of a *caregiver* who is responsible for cultivating safe spaces for others —my students. However, through poetic and dialogic self-study, I have come to better understand that “safety [in the classroom is not] something that we as individual teachers can define, create or bestow on our own” because “caring is a fundamentally relational activity that happens in a web of reciprocal relationships, not in a one- or even two-way flow” (Sykes & Gachago, 2018, pp. 93-94). For years, I have put a great deal of energy into trying to foster an emotionally supportive classroom environment and have aspired to be a relational teacher educator. Now, I see that I was never quite fully prepared to “practice and model what [I] preach” (Kitchen, 2002, p. 40) by taking a “reciprocal approach” and “being sensitive to the role that each participant plays...in the relationship” (Kitchen, 2005, p. 195). And perhaps this requires me to begin to acknowledge that “relational teaching [might also involve me being more] open and [acknowledging] my own struggles” (Sanders, 2019, p. 5). Interrupting a pattern of silence that has persisted for more than 30 years is not easy. But, I have discovered a sense of grace and courage in starting to talk with compassionate others about things I had not told anybody.

In looking at how my self-study research process unfolded, I can see how extending my composition and interpretation of the found poem through dialogue with others enabled me “to present different voices of the self that help present a more complex and complete account of my [learning]” (Furman, 2005, p. 28). As I read what I have written, I can see how my personal and professional voices and selves are interwoven and interconnected in relationship with the voices and selves of others. This intermingling tells a story of professional learning that is made possible through multifaceted, sustained encounters between self and others, and those encounters give this learning a unique texture and complexity. I offer my inquiry as an exemplar of how elements of the literary arts can enrich self-study research in critical and creative ways, particularly in contexts such as South Africa that carry painful histories.

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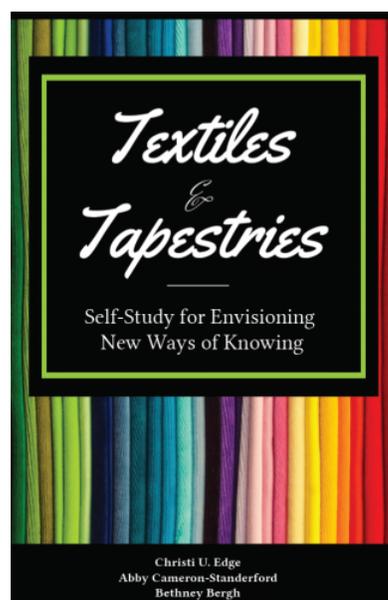
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