

# Editorial

## Self-study of educational practice: Re-imagining our pedagogies

Where does *re-imagining our pedagogies* begin? As self-study researchers, we understand that it starts with our selves. Through self-study of educational practice, we identify issues that we are concerned, curious and passionate about in relation to our own pedagogies and we research those issues in our own contexts. While the research topics are diverse, our common focus is on what difference we as educators can make. Our exploration is about how we can re-imagine our selves, in the hope that our change will have a positive impact on other people. We have confidence that there is always room for change, no matter how small; there is always something we can see or do differently. Thus, we aim to develop practitioner-led, context-specific ideas for change and to explore ways to make that change happen (Pithouse, Mitchell & Weber, 2009). Importantly though, we recognise that, although educational change begins with ‘me’, it must also involve ‘us’. Because we view teaching, learning and researching as interactive processes, we realise that we need the perspectives of significant others such as students, colleagues, and other self-study researchers or ‘critical friends’ to “challenge our assumptions and biases, reveal our inconsistencies [and] expand our potential interpretations” (LaBoksey, 2004: 849). We also need to make our self-study research available for public critique in order to contribute to public conversations about educational change.

As self-study researchers, who are concerned with educational change, we seek to contextualise and balance our inward focus by “simultaneously pointing outwards and towards the political and social” (Mitchell & Weber, 2005: 4). Recent self-study research conducted within South Africa has shown how, in contexts where teaching and learning is often undermined by multiple factors such as persistent social and economic inequities, the HIV epidemic, high levels of violence, and ongoing shifts/uncertainties in teacher responsibilities against a changing curriculum and regulatory landscape, educators’ self-study can illuminate significant issues that have resonance beyond the self and can point to avenues for exploration and growth in the wider educational arena (see, for example, Pithouse, Weber & Mitchell, 2009; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012; Masinga, 2012; 2014). This work has also demonstrated how educators’ self-study can contribute to social action, particularly through the use of creative and participatory research methods (see Pithouse-Morgan *et al.*, 2013).

Much of the initial self-study research was published by teacher educators and teachers based almost exclusively in the 'academic North' (primarily in North America and the United Kingdom); more recently, scholarly conversations have begun to explore the significance of self-study research across a range of academic disciplines (see Harrison, Pithouse-Morgan, Conolly & Meyiwa, 2012; Samaras, 2013) and across North-South boundaries (see Pithouse, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2009; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, forthcoming). This special issue of *Perspectives in Education* continues this trend by offering a collection of articles by self-study researchers who are located across diverse disciplines in higher education institutions in South Africa, Canada and the United States of America (USA). The collection begins with contributions from teacher educators (Weber, Van Laren and Wood), moves on to work done in the domains of Drama (Meskin and Van der Walt) and Graphic Design (Scott) and, finally, to trans-disciplinary self-study (Knowles, Meyiwa *et al.* and Samaras *et al.*).

This special edition follows on from the first South African self-study symposium held in Durban in July 2007 and entitled "*Seeing for ourselves: Exploring the practice of self-study in teaching, learning, and researching for social change*" and from the edited book that grew out of that symposium: *Making connections: Self-study and social action* (Pithouse, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2009). It also taps into recent self-study research initiatives, such as the Transformative Education/al Studies (TES) project, an inter-institutional, trans-disciplinary project that has been addressing some of the complexities of carrying out this work across disciplines in higher education institutions in South Africa (see Harrison *et al.*, 2012).

The TES project was a response to two national educational priorities in South Africa, namely the pressing need to both transform teaching and learning and enhance research and supervision capacity in the higher education sector. TES was a three-year (2011-2013), National Research Foundation (NRF)-funded project led by investigators from a university of technology (Durban University of Technology – DUT), a research-intensive university (University of KwaZulu-Natal – UKZN), a rural comprehensive university (Walter Sisulu University – WSU) and a research council (Human Sciences Research Council – HSRC). Participants were 22 university educators who were registered students (staff-students) at the three participating universities and their 11 supervisors. The staff-students and supervisors, who were located within diverse academic and professional disciplines, formed a trans-disciplinary, multi-institutional educational research learning community. The participants were also diverse in terms of age, gender, race, and language and in terms of varying levels of experience in research and publication, ranging from senior researchers with extensive publication records to new scholars just beginning their Masters' studies. All TES staff-students and supervisors were involved in researching their own educational practice through self-study methodologies. Three of the articles in this special issue (Meskin & Van der Walt; Meyiwa *et al.*; Scott) are authored/co-authored by TES participants. These articles offer a taste of the diverse self-study scholarship that TES staff-students and supervisors have been producing.

The TES project was successful in meeting (and, in most instances, exceeding) all of its 2011-2013 research milestones. Moreover, in 2012, the TES project received the “Top University Research Initiative Award” at the Durban University of Technology’s annual research awards (<http://www.dut.ac.za/node/2523>). The work of the TES project continues to evolve, with the NRF awarding a follow-up three-year (2014-2016) Education Research in South Africa Grant for a new project entitled “Transformative Education/al Studies (TES): Pedagogic Implications for Research Capacity”. Through this meta-analysis project, TES researchers will seek to learn lessons about supporting self-study research and about supporting trans-disciplinary, multi-institutional educational research learning communities. Further explorations will include documenting the nature and processes of generating novel epistemologies and conceptualisations as well as developing innovative context-based methodological approaches. We regard the awarding of this second grant by the NRF as highlighting the educational research community’s recognition of the value and potential of self-study research in the South African context and beyond.

In keeping with this emerging area of scholarship in South Africa, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the educational value and potential of self-study research, but they also reveal that starting with the self is a complex and challenging process that raises critical questions for researchers:

*How do we know if and how what we do in self-study impacts ... unseen others?  
(Weber)*

*What is the value of this research to others? (Scott)*

*How do I make explicit my own values and background in relation to those of the participants, since my ‘self’ is a powerful source of influence on the study?  
(Wood)*

*What am I doing, what is the audience receiving, what is the interplay between the two, and what is happening to my own practice as a result of this composite experience? (Meskin and Van der Walt)*

*Will the methodology that I choose assist effective change? (Meyiwa et al.)*

The various contributions also raise important questions about authorship itself and the ways in which self-study can be a collective process. Anastasia Samaras, in her work with 12 co-authors (Diana Karczmarczyk, Lesley Smith, Louisa Woodville, Laurie Harmon, Ilham Nasser, Seth Parsons, Toni Smith, Kirk Borne, Lynne Constantine, Ezperanza Roman Mendoza, Jennifer Suh, and Ryan Swanson), challenges the notion of sole authored scholarship, signalling the idea that the group process can be a very effective approach to self-study, and that we need new ways of indicating shared authorship. Sandra Weber highlights the significance of influence as she describes the ‘ripple effect’ of the self-study research of three researchers. Then there is the work of Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Theresa Chisanga, Paul Mokhele, Nkosinathi Sotshangane and Sizakele Makhanya, a self-study research group that explores tensions and generativity in shared inquiry. In addition, Tamar Meskin and Tanya van der Walt use dialogue as a way of demonstrating the “interillumination” or “interanimation”

(Holquist, 1981: 429-430) of their collaborative thinking-in-action as they engage reflexively with their practice as theatre-makers and Drama educators.

We also wish to highlight the ways in which visual and arts-based approaches to self-study can play a critical role in re-imagining our pedagogies. As Maxine Greene (1998: 47-49) explains, “engagements with the ... arts [can] release the imaginative capacity into play [and foster] a commitment to the risky search for alternative possibilities”. Sandra Weber, for example, makes a case for arts-based approaches as having an obvious role in reaching and inspiring others. In their articles, Linda van Laren and Lesley Wood highlight the way in which drawing as a visual methodology can be a key feature of “getting the picture and changing the picture” (Mitchell, 2008: 365) through self-study research. Tamar Meskin and Tanya van der Walt demonstrate how they are using theatre and performance in self-study. Lee Scott shows how she brought into dialogue her artist, researcher and teacher ‘selves’ through the use of graphic design and painting.

## **About the articles**

We start with Sandra Weber’s article, *Arts-based self-study: Documenting the ripple effect*, which provides a convincing argument for why and how arts-based approaches make self-study iterative, and research contagious – taking on meanings that go beyond the original parameters. Drawing on three documented cases in the Canadian context, Weber describes the potential ripple effect of arts-based self-study and shows how what begins as research becomes an extended series of teaching experiences that lead to learning and growth for many, linking personal inquiries to a broader and evolving picture of community and throwing into relief issues that demand attention and action, as the ripples expand outward.

In the article, *Beyond metaphor drawings to envisage integration of HIV&AIDS education: A self-study in primary Mathematics teacher education*, Linda van Laren demonstrates how she brought together the seemingly disparate domains of Art, Mathematics Education, and HIV&AIDS Education by using an arts-based metaphor-drawing activity with pre-service teachers. Van Laren explains how, through self-study research, she came to realise that, while the metaphor-drawing activity was an effective way of introducing the pre-service teachers to the integration of HIV&AIDS-related issues into the teaching of Mathematics, she still had to find other ways to assist them with putting integration into practice in the classroom.

Lesley Wood in her article, *Values-based self-reflective action research for promoting gender equality: Some unexpected lessons*, takes us into a project with a group of teachers who engage in examining their own assumptions and values relating to gender and gender-based violence in their teaching. Significantly, Wood does not merely describe the self-reflective action research of the teachers, but also draws attention to her own reflexivity in working alongside the teachers.

The next two articles focus on self-study in Drama and Graphic Design. In their article, *The director's 'I': Theatre, self, and self-study*, Tamar Meskin and Tanya van der Walt make a compelling case for exploring the parallels between engaging in the project of self-study and the structures of performance and drama, modelling as they do throughout the article a type of performed dialogue. In their approach, they draw on a/r/tography as a framework for writing about/performing arts. As they write: "We see ourselves as belonging to the community of a/r/tographers (Sullivan, 2006), where we see ourselves as artists (theatre-makers), researchers (investigators of our theatrical practice) and teachers (facilitators of learning for both our students and ourselves)". Likewise, Lee Scott highlights the interconnection of her "artist-self" with her "researcher- and teacher-self". Her article, *'Digging deep': Self-study as a reflexive approach to improving my practice as an artist, researcher and teacher*, explores the personal and educational significance of using a combination of graphic design and painting to "[make] visually apparent the integration of artist, researcher and teacher".

In her article, *Vulnerability: Self-study's contribution to social justice education*, Corrine Knowles discusses how she engages with self-study as a tool to analyse the norms that operate in her classroom so that she can become more inclusive, and in so doing, contribute to social justice pedagogy. She presents a convincing perspective of how when self-study works with vulnerability – to one's peers, to students, to new knowledge, to loss of dearly held beliefs and stories – it has the potential to continuously inform teaching practice and expand the norms that frame them. The article powerfully demonstrates how this potential vulnerability, and loss of self, can be a "resource for politics" (Butler 2004: 30).

Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Theresa Chisanga, Paul Mokhele, Nkosinathi Sotshangane and Sizakele Makhanya, a research group of three postgraduate students and two supervisors, highlight the critical need to pay reflexive attention to context in self-study research. Their article, *Complex journeys and methodological responses to engaging in self-study in a rural comprehensive university*, demonstrates how they – individually and collectively – grappled with epistemological, ontological and practical tensions while undertaking self-study research across diverse disciplines in a rural, under-resourced educational context. They conclude that "self-study inquiry is an essential tool for transformative education especially for research, teaching, and learning in a poor, rural, and under-resourced" pedagogic setting.

Finally, working in a very different context to Meyiwa *et al.*, Anasatasia Samaras, with Diana Karczmarczyk, Lesley Smith, Louisa Woodville, Laurie Harmon, Ilham Nasser, Seth Parsons, Toni Smith, Kirk Borne, Lynne Constantine, Ezperanza Roman Mendoza, Jennifer Suh and Ryan Swanson, also take up "re-imagining our pedagogies" in the realm of collective and trans-disciplinary self-study research in their article *A pedagogy changer: Transdisciplinary faculty self-study*. As the article highlights, "university cultures do not typically promote or support self-study groups so that faculty can collectively explore their pedagogy". In this trans-disciplinary

study at one university in the USA, a self-study group called “Scholars of Studying Teaching Collaborative” (SoSTC) was formed. As the authors note, the work of the group involved both personal and collaborative inquiry. Overall, the article makes a strong case for re-imagining our pedagogies through trans-disciplinary, collective self-study inquiries.

It is interesting to note that the research by Samaras *et al.*, conducted in the USA, resonates with the South African Council on Higher Education’s new *Framework for institutional quality enhancement* (2014), which emphasises the generative value of institutional support for higher education teaching staff who wish to contribute to new communities of practice by researching and re-imagining their own pedagogies. Indeed, the *Framework* document (2014: 21) stresses that transformation of teaching and learning in the higher education sector depends on “developing a higher education system that is improving continuously as members of the higher education community collaborate to share good practices and solve shared problems”. The *Framework* offers rich possibilities for changes at the level of both policy and practice in South African higher education institutions.

Taken as a whole, the articles in this special issue highlight self-study as a fruitful area for both research and institutional transformation.

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