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## 9. LEARNING ABOUT CO-FLEXIVITY IN A TRANSDISCIPLINARY SELF-STUDY RESEARCH SUPERVISION COMMUNITY

In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (bell hooks, 1994, p. 207)

### A POETIC PROLOGUE

*Moving, Stepping, Not Up or Down*

People and lives  
Coming together  
Care at the centre  
Care emerges

Is it worth saying?

Emotional pedagogy  
Entangled ideas  
“I”s “eyes” converge  
Interrogate the unknown

Is it worth saying?

Moving, stepping, not up or down  
Beginning, end, and middle  
Zizag to a spiral  
Having fun

Is it worth saying?

Space of productive tension  
Space of uncertainty  
Scaffolding, selecting and shaping  
Fluidity of ideas

Is it worth saying?

Multiple perspectives  
More meaningful  
Rigour and reflection  
Rather than solving it

Is it worth saying?

Open up the mystery

#### CONTEXT

In South Africa, every postgraduate (master's or doctoral) student is usually assigned one academic advisor, known as a supervisor. "The traditional model is the apprenticeship model of individual mentoring. This model is usually supplemented by informal and ad hoc support programmes" (Academy of Science of South Africa [ASSAf], 2010, p. 64). The South African National Development Plan (National Planning Commission, 2012) emphasised the need for a significant increase in the percentage of doctorally qualified staff in the higher education sector, and the need to devote more resources to supporting research capacity development in the higher education sector. Correspondingly, the recent ASSAf (2010) report on doctoral education in South African higher education institutions highlighted the quandary of not enough qualified and experienced research supervisors. Moreover, it was noted in the report that beginner supervisors are often not receiving adequate support to develop their supervisory capacity. The report also emphasises an increasing consciousness that the "traditional apprenticeship model" of one-to-one supervision might not always be the most effective mode for supporting postgraduate research (ASSAf, 2010, p. 64).

We (the authors of this chapter) are a group of 10 postgraduate research supervisors from the Durban University of Technology, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Walter Sisulu University who contribute to the Transformative Education/ al Studies (TES) project in South Africa. TES is a research-intervention project that aims to study and enhance the development of self-study research and supervision capacity within a transdisciplinary,<sup>1</sup> multi-institutional research learning community located across a range of university contexts in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa. The TES project began in 2011 and was, in part, a response to the critical need to enhance research supervision capacity building in the higher education sector in South Africa, as highlighted in the ASSAf report (2010).

The student participants who we supervise in the TES project are university educators registered for master's and doctoral degrees and all are using self-study methodologies to research their own educational practice. These "staff-students" teach in diverse academic and professional disciplines, including communication, clothing, business studies, education, drama, English education, jewellery design, and mathematics education. A variety of academic and professional disciplines is also represented within our group of self-study research supervisors: drama education (Lorraine); educational leadership and management (Inbanathan);

educational psychology (Nithi); English language studies (Theresa); English and media education (Jean); gender studies (Thenjiwe); mathematics education (Linda); rural education (Relebohile); teacher development studies (Daisy and Kathleen).

Under the auspices of the TES project, we have, throughout our 6-year relationship, been working together in a collaborative self-study supervision community. We have been driven by the imperative to have critically constructive conversations about our own supervisory practices and selves, with the aim of providing enhanced support for our students' individual self-study research projects. Flowing out of regular research support meetings at the individual institutions, quarterly supervisors' meetings, and other TES project activities, we have given joint conference presentations (e.g., Pithouse-Morgan, Rawlinson, Pillay, Chisanga, & Timm, 2012; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014d) and co-published papers (e.g., Harrison, Pithouse-Morgan, Conolly, & Meyiwa, 2012; Van Laren et al., 2014).

#### CO-FLEXIVITY

One of the core principles or guideposts for self-study research is its insistence on collaboration with others during the research process (Bodone, Gudjónsdóttir, & Dalmau, 2004; Samaras & Freese, 2009). Thus, self-study requires sustained attention to relationships between self and “others” in research. Others can include published work that has influenced the researcher's thinking, coresearchers, research participants, and critical friends—peers who work with the researcher to offer alternative perspectives and feedback (e.g., Samaras & Sell, 2013; Schuck, & Russell, 2005). Staff-student and supervisor participants in the TES research learning community serve as critical friends for each other's research. Thus, in TES, there are three layers of critical friends working together—with ongoing learning conversations that move across these layers: supervisors with supervisors; staff-student with staff-students; supervisors with staff-students. In this chapter, we are focusing on our learning conversations as supervisors with supervisors.

From the beginning of the TES project in 2011, we (the TES supervisors) have been meeting regularly to discuss our supervisory experiences and practices. Early on in these discussions, we identified a need to “walk our talk” by studying our selves as self-study supervisors (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011). In an earlier publication, we collectively explored our understandings and experiences as self-study supervisors using the visual arts-based research practice of metaphor drawings (Van Laren et al., 2014). The metaphor drawings we prepared served as visual data for our collective inquiry into how we thought self-study supervision ought to occur. In this chapter, we are seeking to be increasingly reflexive in our quest to “become more mindful of how our selves, positionings, understandings, and beliefs as researchers [and research supervisors] interact with research processes and influence the educational representations and explanations we [and our students] produce” (Pithouse-Morgan, Mitchell, & Pillay, 2014a, p. 1). Significantly, we recognise our quest for enhanced reflexivity as a relational process. As Simon (2012) highlighted:

While reflexivity has become part of good practice in qualitative research, it often appears to mean ‘self-reflection’ or aims to offer the reader some transparency about researcher bias or their relationship with the research focus...Relational reflexivity...extends the idea of reflexivity beyond that of individual experience and into a relational context. (para. 36)

In our view, therefore, research reflexivity requires us to confront and make public our inquiry into our selves as researchers (and research supervisors) and how those selves interact with other selves within particular research contexts. For us, this involves a recognition of the value of engaging with a plurality of views, perspectives, and responses (Vickers, 2010)—thereby allowing us to find our voices in relation to the voices of others. Relational research reflexivity requires not only self-awareness, but also self-exposure, which in turn requires a fair measure of emotional self-knowledge and self-care (Rager, 2005). In our experience, it is less frightening to reveal and reexamine our relational selves in the presence of colleagues who we know well and trust. Increasingly, we have also become aware of how being reflexive together through thinking deeply about and questioning our professional practice and selves in dialogue with significant others—what we have come to call, co-flexivity—can deepen and extend our learning, being, and becoming as self-study supervisors and researchers (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014d).

In this chapter, we make visible our learning about co-flexivity (collective reflexivity) through a shared research process of composing poems and reflexive dialogues. In representing our polyvocal professional learning, we aim to communicate our diverse voices and to demonstrate how these voices came together to make meaning of the complexities, challenges, and value of co-flexivity. We conclude by sharing our thoughts on possible implications that our thinking about co-flexivity might have for others.

## METHODS

As self-study researchers, we can use any appropriate method to help us respond to our research puzzles (Loughran, 2004). Furthermore, in self-study we are required to use multiple methods to gain diverse perspectives on the same phenomenon (LaBoskey, 2004). In our work as self-study researchers and supervisors, we have found that less conventional visual and literary arts-based self-study research practices—such as poetry writing, working with artefacts, and drawing—can be of particular value in facilitating the enhanced subjectivity and reflexivity that we are seeking (e.g., Chisanga, Rawlinson, Madi, & Sotshangane, 2014; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012; Van Laren et al., 2014). As Weber (2014) explained, “arts-based approaches . help make self-study *iterative*. This type of research tends to be contagious and takes on meanings that go beyond its original parameters” (p. 16).

Common questions that we encounter from peer reviewers or conference audiences in terms of our unconventional research approach selections are: “What

about objectivity?” and “What about generalisability?” A positive outcome of such criticisms is that we as individual researchers and as a collective are encouraged to be transparent and reflexive about, and to extend our theorising to, our selections for research initiatives. In this regard, we have found it helpful to draw on Eisner’s explanation of how alternative or arts-based research practices can allow for “productive ambiguity,” which he described in this way:

the material presented is more evocative than denotative, and in its evocation, it generates insight and invites attention to complexity. Unlike the traditional ideal of conventional research, some alternative forms...result in less closure and more plausible interpretations of the meaning of the situation...the open texture of the form increases the probability that multiple perspectives will emerge. Multiple perspectives make our engagement with the phenomena more complex. (1997, p. 8)

In our quest for more complex engagement and multiple perspectives, we have used two alternative research practices to enact our inquiry into co-flexivity: collective poetic inquiry (Chisanga et al., 2014; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014c) and reflexive dialogue (Van Laren et al., 2014; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012). In taking a dialogic approach, we build on the work of self-study researchers who argued for the use of dialogue as a method to critically analyse their self-study process and content (e.g., East, Fitzgerald, & Heston, 2009; Guilfoyle, Hamilton, Pinnegar, & Placier, 2004). East et al. further contended that reflexive dialogue as an analysis tool is useful “to focus on [our] insights-in-the-moment as they arise spontaneously in the actual dialogue process” (2009, p. 58). Wells in his book, *Dialogic Inquiry*, went on to state that:

by contributing to the joint meaning making with and for others, one also makes meaning for oneself and, in the process, extends one’s own understanding. At the same time, the ‘utterance’ viewed from the perspective of what is said, is a knowledge artefact that potentially contributes to the collaborative knowledge building of all those who are co-participants in the activity. (1999, p. 108)

Drawing from Wells, collective poetic inquiry is our collective utterance and a knowledge artefact that is crucial for our knowledge building as coresearchers. The poems and dialogues that follow demonstrate and articulate our thinking about the concept of co-flexivity and about what we are learning through working together as self-study research supervisors. Through our poems and dialogues, we aim to respond to the following research questions:

- How do we understand our co-flexive experiences and enactments?
- What difference does co-flexivity make to us as transdisciplinary self-study research supervisors?
- What are we learning about the complexities, challenges, and value of co-flexivity?

CO-FLEXIVITY: A POETIC REENACTMENT

*A Collective Poetic Inquiry Process*

Working together in a poetic inquiry process conducted during four one-day workshops and continuing e-mail correspondence over a period of 10 months, we collaboratively composed a series of poems to articulate and gain further understanding of the nature and value of our co-flexive experience as self-study research supervisors within the TES group. These TES supervisor workshops were organised by Kathleen in her capacity as the current lead investigator on the TES project, but the focus and poetic inquiry method of each workshop emerged quite spontaneously through our interaction. Each workshop built on and extended the collective poetic procedures and products of the previous workshop. For the first workshop, we met at a conference venue and for the other three workshops, we met at one of our universities. Our intended focus for the first workshop was to delve further into our understandings and experiences of critical friendship in self-study. However, it was during our discussions at this workshop that Linda coined the term, co-flexivity, which started us off on a collective poetic exploration of this concept.

Not all of us were able to be present at all four workshops and so our e-mail correspondence, along with audio recordings of our workshop conversations that we shared online via Dropbox (<https://www.dropbox.com>), and the poems that we composed in each workshop, allowed those who were not physically present to “relive” the collective workshop experience.

The collective process of poetry making assisted us in developing the concept of co-flexivity that we have identified as being characteristic of, and central to, our collaborative practice as supervisors of transdisciplinary self-study research. The poems show the meanings we are making of our ongoing collective inquiry, and offer entry points for thinking about the concept and praxis of co-flexivity.

*Composing Our Initial Found Poem: “Co-Flexivity: What Difference Does This Make?”*

The first poem that we composed together, “Co-flexivity: What difference does this make?” emerged as a response to our desire to begin to make some shared sense of the idea of co-flexivity that we had begun to talk about together. Our collective process of poetry making emerged as we went along and we decided together on each new step to take in creating the poems. We began composing our first poem by each writing a tweet (a social media message of not more than 140 characters) in response to a question: “Co-flexivity: What difference does this make?” (See [Figure 9.1](#)). As a self-study data generation technique, the written tweet format helped us each to express our initial thoughts about co-flexivity in a concise, yet conversational way (see Chisanga et al., 2014).

Care is at the centre  
of it all - an  
appreciation of the  
sharing, support and  
cognizance of how  
invaluable co-supervisors  
are for each person's  
& all of our thoughts -  
as a collective

Figure 9.1. An example of a written tweet

We then gathered the written tweets and typed them out together in a Word document that was projected on a screen via a data projector. We decided to enter the collected tweets into Wordle (<http://www.wordle.net/>). Wordle is an online tool for generating “word clouds” from text. The clouds make more prominent those words that recur most often in the source text. The word cloud that we generated (see Figure 9.2) helped us to gain a sense of the ideas that were most common across our tweets. It also helped us to look at our tweets as a whole “tweet cloud” rather than as individual tweets.



Figure 9.2. Our Wordle tweet cloud

The word cloud helped us then, jointly, to identify and highlight words and phrases from our tweets that we considered most significant in response to our question: “Co-flexivity: What difference does this make?” (see [Figure 9.3](#)).

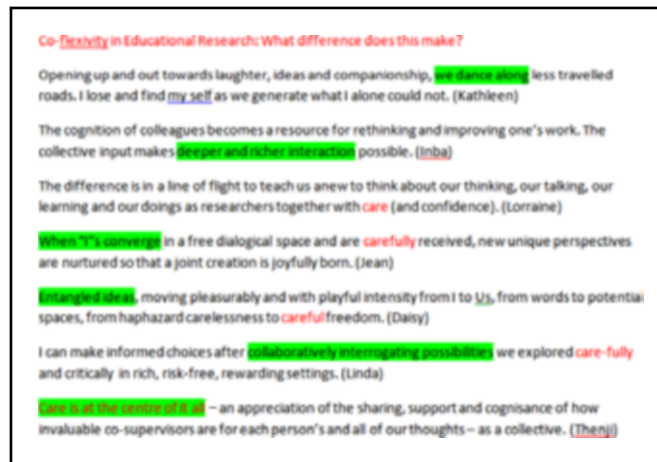


Figure 9.3. Our selection of significant words and phrases from the tweets

We then used the selected words and phrases from the tweets to cocreate a found poem. Found poems are used in research to represent extracts from field texts or data sources in poetic form (Butler-Kisber, 2002). These extracts can be combined in any way to form a poem, but no new words can be added. As Butler-Kisber (2002, p. 233) explained, “found poetry...brings the researcher closer to the data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights.” Recomposing our individual ideas about co-flexivity into a coauthored found poem, allowed us to see a process of mutual thinking unfolding. Both the process and product of the poem making offered insights into our understandings and experiences of co-flexivity:

*Co-flexivity: What difference does this make?*

Care is at the centre of it all

When “I”s converge

We dance along

Care is at the centre of it all

Entangled ideas

Deeper and richer interaction

Collaboratively interrogating possibilities

Care is at the centre of it all



*A Collective Exploration of Our Initial Found Poem*

In a subsequent workshop some months later, we decided that it would be helpful in moving our thinking forward if we were to begin by revisiting the poem we had cocomposed. Jean, a lecturer in the field of English and media education, introduced us to three prompts that she uses with her students to elicit their responses to poetry:

- *What* does the poem say?
- *How* does it say it?
- Is it *worth* saying?

Jean gave us some examples of what we might look for when considering each of the prompts. For instance, for the first prompt, she advised us to think about the title and key message of the poem. We then each wrote down individual notes in response to the prompts. Next, we shared our responses to each prompt in turn and typed our responses onto a Word document that was projected via a data projector (see [Figure 9.4](#)).

**Poetic Analysis:**  
Co-flexivity in Educational Research: What difference does this make?

**What does it say?**  
Linda: emotions, e.g. care, deep rich; Actions: converge, dance  
Theresa: Do we begin with caring before we come together? Or do we begin by coming together and care emerges? With care, collaboration can bring about great results, the best in everyone.  
Inba: Values: safe space, mutual caring  
Jean: Title suggests much of what poem is about – starts with a statement/focus – 2 linked ideas: co-flexivity (novel, unusual) and educational research (known)  
Colon – linking ideas – reflexive position – asking us to interrogate – suggestions start emerging through the poem  
Daisy: Philosophical position underpinned by care and fluidity of ideas  
Caring interaction resulting in multiple possibilities – critical in the incubation and development of ideas  
Kathleen: Co-flexivity – mystery/unknown/intriguing or not? Complexity – stillness at the centre and movement – ‘organised chaos / chaos theory’ Things come together because the centre does hold – spiralling as a release – but not out of control – care as a basis (Yeats)  
Jean: Need that space and time to do that caring and coming together

**How does it say it?**  
Linda: Soft sounds: care, centre; step-by-step structure/process – like a stairway. Maybe “care” line should be centred?  
Theresa: To what end? Repetition of “care....” Use of “converge” – arriving together at the same point; “dance” – having fun, joy; Acknowledging richness of different perspectives “entangles ideas”. Poem sounds like a song. Looks like a dance.  
Inba: repetition of words; Shape – staircase – through sharing of ideas – climbing to reach a higher level of thinking – reminded of Vygotsky’s scaffolding / ZPD – the group provides the scaffolding. When “I’s” “eyes” converge  
Jean: Repetition – beginning, end and middle – like a chorus – very strong point; Words that suggest action: converge, entanglement, interaction, collaboration – all about collective and coming together in different ways; Emerging from this converging – the ideas and possibilities and joy  
Daisy: Use of words like: converge, dance, entangled – multiple; Zigzag / diagonal – metaphor of dance – stepping (not up or down) – shifting – not hierarchical – spiral – multiple shifts in different directions, not a linear shift – engagement and multiple shifts that have to made together. Moving from a cycle of ideas to a spiral of ideas – hermeneutic cycle to hermeneutic spiral  
Kathleen: stillness – movement – productive tension; Care – as the anchor, root; 4 Cs – co-flexivity, care, centre, collaboratively (soft sound)  
Jean: No punctuation – can stop and linger wherever you want – that allows for the stillness – very unstructured – yet it’s got a structure

Figure 9.4. Some of our responses to Jean’s prompts

We wondered about how best to communicate our collective exploration of our found poem and decided to use the words and phrases we had written to create a series of three additional found poems—one per prompt. Again, we collaboratively identified and highlighted those words and phrases that we found most significant in response to each prompt (see [Figure 9.5](#)).

**What does it say?**  
**Linda:** emotions, e.g. care, deep rich; Actions: converge, dance  
**Theresa:** Do we begin with caring before we come together/ Or do we begin by coming together and care emerges? With care, collaboration can bring about great results, the best in everyone.  
**Inba:** Values: safe space, mutual caring  
**Jean:** Title suggests much of what poem is about – starts with a statement/focus – 2 linked ideas: coflexivity (novel, unusual) and educational research (known); Colon – linking ideas – reflexive position – asking us to interrogate – suggestions start emerging through the poem  
**Daisy:** Philosophical position underpinned by care and fluidity of ideas; Caring interaction resulting in multiple possibilities – critical in the incubation and development of ideas  
**Kathleen:** Co-flexivity – mystery/unknown/intriguing or not?; Complexity – stillness at the centre and movement – ‘organised chaos / chaos theory’; Things come together because the centre does hold – spiralling as a release – but not out of control – care as a basis (Yeats)  
**Jean:** Need that space and time to do that caring and coming together

*Figure 9.5. Our selection of significant words and phrases from our responses to the prompt: What does it say?*

We then used the highlighted words and phrases to compose a found poem in response to each prompt. These poems are presented below. The first poem, “Co-flexivity”, responds to “What does it say?”:

*Co-flexivity*

Coming together  
safe space and time  
the centre does hold

Coming together  
to interrogate  
the unknown

Do we begin with caring?  
Care emerges  
as a basis  
the centre does hold

Collaboration  
can bring  
emotions  
incubation

LEARNING ABOUT CO-FLEXIVITY

fluidity of ideas  
multiple possibilities

Stillness at the centre  
spiralling as a release

Things come together

The centre does hold

The next poem, “When ‘I’s ‘eyes’ converge”, responds to “*How* does it say it?”:

*When ‘I’s ‘eyes’ converge*

Soft sounds  
like a chorus  
like a song

Zigzag  
to a spiral

like a dance

Having fun

Moving  
stepping  
not up or down

Scaffolding  
climbing

beginning, end and middle

Stillness—movement

productive

The third poem, “Open up the mystery”, responds to “Is it *worth* saying?”:

*Open up the mystery*

This time  
research is lived  
more meaningful  
interactive

Not hard and fast  
not “one size fits all”

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Context—linked  
people and lives  
what this country needs  
indigenous knowledge  
our *Ubuntu*<sup>2</sup>

Possible meanings  
missing from educational research

Open up the mystery  
rather than solving it

Critical for openness  
critical for multiple possibilities

Own opinions  
ideas of others  
an inclusive space

Offers a safe space  
an invitational space  
to just wander around in

Is it *worth* saying?  
*Yes!*

We concluded the workshop by sending an e-mail to the four members of our group—Relebohile, Lorraine, Nithi, and Thenjiwe—who had not been able to attend, asking them to read and respond to the four poems that we had now cocomposed.

These four group members then e-mailed their responses. Three wrote reflections on the poems and one member, Lorraine, composed this poem as her response:

*My response*

Light and effortless  
It seems to be  
Yet we  
Know otherwise

Like all we strive, work, yearn  
This does not come lightly  
Not without  
Doubt and despair  
Seeking and finding,  
Selecting and shaping  
Rigour and reflection  
Like all we strive, work, learn

Light and effortless  
 It seems to be  
 Made so  
 By co...  
 flexivity

*Developing a Summative Found Poem*

At the next workshop, we chose to try to gain an overview of our evolving collective meaning making of co-flexivity by developing a summative found poem composed of extracts from our existing four poems and the responses e-mailed by Relebohile, Lorraine, Nithi, and Thenjiwe. Again, we followed a process of projecting our field texts (the poems and e-mailed responses) in a Word document and then highlighting noteworthy words and phrases. The result is the poem that we offer as the prologue to this chapter, “Moving, stepping, not up or down”.

CO-FLEXIVITY—A DIALOGIC RE-ENACTMENT

Through face-to-face and e-mail interactions in which we shared our responses to our poems and our poetic inquiry process, we have been able to deepen and extend our understandings of the characteristics and possible implications of co-flexivity in our work together as self-study research supervisors, as well as what relevance this might have for others. The reflexive dialogues that follow are composed of excerpts from transcripts of our audio-recorded conversations as well as our e-mail correspondence, in which we have been working through our thinking about the concept and praxis of co-flexivity.

Kathleen began the process of developing the dialogues by listening again to the audio recordings of the workshops and transcribing sections of our conversations that seemed to offer insights into our evolving co-thinking about co-flexivity. She added in some relevant excerpts from our e-mail correspondence and also did a preliminary round of editing to facilitate flow and coherence. Linda then read what Kathleen had produced and clustered it into initial thematic dialogues. Linda began the process of writing interpretive portrayals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of each dialogue, drawing in some earlier interpretive writing that Nithi and Daisy had produced. Next, Kathleen edited the clustered sections to make them more concise and gave each section a heading to convey its central message. She then circulated these first draft dialogues via e-mail to the group and asked each person in turn to use the tracked changes function in Word to add, delete, and rearrange in order to produce a series of dialogues and interpretive portrayals that would best represent our collective, evolving, sense making of co-flexivity. In other words, as a group of supervisors and self-study researchers, we were participating and dialoguing in praxis collectively, and attempting to account for and make public how we experienced praxis, akin to Roth and Tobin’s (2004) notion of “co-generative dialoguing” (p. 2).

Each dialogue is followed by our shared interpretive portrayal of what we are understanding and learning about co-flexivity's complexity, and its value to us as self-study research supervisors. Through these interpretive portrayals, we respond to our guiding research questions:

- How do we understand our co-flexive experiences and enactments?
- What difference does co-flexivity make to us as transdisciplinary self-study research supervisors?
- What are we learning about the complexities, challenges, and value of co-flexivity?

*Dialogue One: Authoring Our Own Research Scripts*

*Thenjiwe:* James Scott (1990) talked of domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts. When people are dominated, they can get pushed to be very generative. In a context where there is domination, like in academia where there is so much positivism, I regard the kind of work that we're doing as something of that nature where, within the framework and prescripts of a dominating system, the marginal gets pushed to come up with scripts that transgress...and more importantly generate knowledge.

*Theresa:* Like protest literature?

*Thenjiwe:* I am just reminded of that in terms of how, with our students and us as individuals, the kind of work that we do and are pushed to produce, is an exemplar of what Scott (1990) defined as a transcript that is birthed because of the dominating framework within which the scribe finds herself.

*Linda:* So, if we get pushed into a corner, we've got to find creative ways of getting out?

*Daisy:* Authoring our own scripts.

*Kathleen:* I know for me, as a supervisor and researcher, what happens in our group makes me a lot more confident in being creative and thinking outside the usual. When you're able to discuss it with a group of like-minded people, then you can see that there is some merit in this idea that might be considered completely "off the wall" by other people.

*Thenjiwe:* But most important is how one becomes creative about it. How you react and how it becomes useful. How you work with that is actually a kind of performance, a kind of an art.

*Daisy:* So, is this also a form of our identity, how we want to be identified? This performance of being alternate? Do we want to, as a group, perform

ourselves as particular kinds of supervisors and researchers? I'm thinking of performance and Butler's (2004) notion of performative.

As academics, we have emerged from a common history of exposure to traditional research paradigms (which usually emphasise positivism) and epistemologies. In the TES project, we have been questioning and interrogating our supervision and research practices and have placed under scrutiny, grand narratives about the nature of knowledge, truth, and social reality. As a grouping of self-study researchers and supervisors, we have chosen to engage in collective inquiry to learn about and develop greater awareness and consciousness for new possibilities for research practices. We draw support from Fox (2003) who described this kind of collaborative inquiry as "ethically and politically engaged research practice" (p. 81).

In addition, through co-flexivity, we collaboratively extend our research initiatives using creative approaches. In our work, we can be performers or even the participants in the audience as we explore generative research strategies, bearing in mind our understanding that "generativity connotes creativity and a calling to contribute to the well-being of others" (Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012, p. 417). The co-flexive actions that we select also often result in making use of some form of arts-based product, such as poetry or drawing. These products, in turn allow for further co-flexivity whilst we interrogate our involvement in self-study supervision and research.

#### *Dialogue Two: Providing a Critical Space for Border Crossing*

*Kathleen:* One of my doctoral students has been writing something that's like a memoir, but it's got methodology and literature and theory woven into it. Initially, she was worried about whether she was working on the methodology chapter or something else. I said, "Well, just do it and then we'll see ..."

*Thenjiwe:* [Laughing] Our students get very irritated when we say, "Could you just write?" They want to name the chapter.

*Kathleen:* Yes, and it was interesting that a question that came from other students in our self-study research support meeting was, "Is this the methodology chapter? Or is it ...?" And Nithi was suggesting that maybe it could be an integrated research text, rather than divided into separate chapters.

*Linda:* So, we're crossing borders again?

*Theresa:* It eventually becomes like a movement, not necessarily for change, but for something that can at least be parallel and accommodate people who can't always fit into a box.

*Daisy:* So, is the whole issue of being co-flexive then ... blurring the traditional boundaries?

*Nithi:* I think that Kathleen as a supervisor is providing a critical space for border crossing.

*Kathleen:* I'm a lot more confident in doing that when I have other people who listen to my student's work and say, "Well that makes sense." I'm able to be more open as a supervisor, just to say, "Well, go and explore that... Let's see what you come up with." With our group, you've got that sense of a space where those ideas can be taken and shared and explored.

*Inbanathan:* Yes. There's no blueprint. Every self-study is unique and each one takes a different direction.

*Kathleen:* But it can make the students anxious. Because they say, "But how will it turn out?" And I say, "I don't know ..."

[Laughter]

*Inbanathan:* Self-study has got a life of its own. It develops organically. Students ask, "I am doing the right thing?" And I say, "I don't know. We'll have to work through it together."

Participating in a community of self-study supervisors gives us courage and support in engaging with the challenges of unsettling and disrupting conventional boundaries, and with possibilities for becoming border intellectuals (hooks, 1994; Said, 1994). Like hooks (1994) and Giroux (1992), we view the transgressive process of crossing borders as a collective endeavour of shared dialogue, critical reflections, reflexive thought, and debate. We see our learning community as offering fertile participatory spaces for mobilising agency and for collective critique and disrupting more conventional ways of knowing and doing research.

In our collective inquiry, we engage reflexively in border spaces—such spaces engage us in the risky process of exploring a new richness of data—its production, analysis, and representation through innovative and creative techniques. We want to reinvent how we conceptualise, receive, write, and read research—to move beyond conventional eyes or lenses. As a collaborative transdisciplinary team of research supervisors, we can challenge each other's understanding of self-study methodologies and use the knowledge offered in unexpected, creative ways. Although we come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, as we have worked together over the years, we have been developing a common language through centring our dialogue on our shared exploration of the research genre of self-study.

During our collective meetings, and through co-flexivity, we feel encouraged to take on "risky" research processes bravely and in sustainable ways. Furthermore, working creatively and collectively affords opportunities to produce new knowledge that we as participants find playful and enjoyable because we often become participants in creative activities where we take ourselves out of our ordinary roles by moving across boundaries. The experiences then result in shifting our thinking and perceptions through our participation in unusual and unexpected creative



activities. For example, through a participatory metaphor drawing activity, we were able collectively to rethink our experiences and understandings of becoming and being supervisors of postgraduate self-study students (Van Laren et al., 2014).

When working with postgraduate students, generativity (Ball, 2012) involves us as self-study supervisors encouraging the students to take a leading role in deciding on the shape and size of their research initiatives. The supervisor needs to stand back and let go of regulating the generative processes. However, when the self-study supervisor is no longer “in charge” of the supervision process, then there is an equilibrium disturbance in the traditional power and knowledge possession relations. This imbalance can be disquieting for both the student and the supervisor. It requires that “both student and supervisor...acknowledge that their forms of knowing are moving and that there is no stable or static centre or periphery, no linearity in their meaning making” (Rawlinson & Pillay, 2014, p. 300).

*Dialogue Three: Producing Knowledge Differently and Producing Different Knowledge*

*Nithi:* So what has co-flexivity done for us as supervisors and researchers?

*Thenjiwe:* It leads to making a much more growing, developing contribution towards knowledge.

*Inbanathan:* In working in this co-flexive way, each one’s cognition becomes a resource for the others and we build on that. And we also challenge each other’s cognition as well.

*Kathleen:* It also illustrates the Bakhtinian idea of the “inter-animation” of thinking (Holquist, 1981, pp. 429–430). When we are in a co-flexive group, our ideas inter-animate to create new ideas that are group ideas. The concept of co-flexivity itself emerged from the inter-animation of our thinking. In self-study, Guilefoyle et al. (2002) talked about the “brain in the middle of the table”—that there’s a new idea that belongs to all of us.

*Jean:* That would be a challenging poem to write, about the brain in the middle of the table and the action on it or from it.

*Lorraine:* There’s a lot of healing that happens that way. For example, network therapy (<http://www.networktherapy.com/>). It’s a form of chiropractic treatment. You never go for a session on your own. You must be there with someone else. Because the breathing and energy that you release, helps the next person.

*Kathleen:* And I also think that as we bring our diverse disciplinary knowledges in, we offer ideas that we weren’t all necessarily exposed to before.

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

*Lorraine:* And it's not about egos. So, there's a lot more room for this type of engagement. Ego can be very destructive to collaboration and it's very powerful in the academic world.

*Daisy:* When you get rid of the ego—"I am this and I know this"—then there's a oneness and a connection.

*Relebohile:* I recently heard Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie speak on "the dangers of a single story" (2009)—that it is always better to know different stories or perspectives on a context or an issue. Informed by this, I think the idea of co-flexivity has the potential to ensure that our analysis of issues and the claims we make are not based on a single story or perspective. 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.

*Daisy:* I'm reminded of St Pierre's (1997) famous phrase, "producing knowledge differently and producing different knowledge." I think that's what happens, because each of us responds with our knowledge and when we put it together, we produce different knowledges and the way we come to produce it is changing as well.

*Dialogue Four: Changing What We Do Here is Changing Us as People .*

*Theresa:* For me, at the beginning I was just feeling completely lost. At our first meeting of self-study supervisors, I was wondering, "But what's going on here?"

[Laughter]

*Thenjiwe:* For me, having been schooled in feminist research, I had got accustomed, in my personal work and that of my students, to reflecting but not really being reflexive. What self-study has done for me is that, actually, the scales have fallen off in terms of seeing the stark difference. It has really shifted me.

*Daisy:* I think I've become so aware of my role in the supervisory relationship. It was always something that I was interested in, the relationship between supervisor and student, but I think, for so long, I just did what I did, you know?

*Theresa:* You did your job.

*Daisy:* Yes, but ever since getting involved with self-study, I've become so aware of my role in the supervisory relationship. Before, I focused more on the student. Now I focus more on, "What am I saying? What am I doing?" I can

see now how my students have become confident because I have pulled back. Before, I was too scared to pull back.

*Thenjiwe:* I can relate to that.

*Daisy:* Sometimes, having a supervision meeting is a struggle. You've got to think: "Who is this student? What's the best way to be setting this person free to become creative?"

*Nithi:* I think the other thing is that most of our students come from exposure to very traditional, linear kinds of research. But what I have found is that they just lap up creative ways of doing research.

*Daisy:* I think parallel to student learning is our learning. The one can't work without the other.

*Thenjiwe:* As a feminist researcher and supervisor, I have been thinking I am allowing students to generate information but, in retrospect, I have been taking the lead. And, as one gets self-study students to take the lead, I see how confidence in students builds up. So, that's the difference for me.

*Daisy:* I think that changing what we do here is changing us as people.

*Lorraine:* Yes. It's about improving your practice and so, in doing that, you are changing the self. You change the self so that the situation around you changes.

We have realised that critical introspection and shared vulnerability are key elements for us because the collective self-study process allows us to become less certain as supervisors and researchers. That uncertainty or "productive unknowing" allows us to explore new ways of looking at things, to step back from our habitual expert roles and to acknowledge that we can learn from our students and from each other (Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan, 2014, pp. 92–94). We have also realised that what we are doing falls into the understanding of research as ongoing personal development (Backhouse, 2011; Harrison et al., 2012). Our experiences as self-study supervisors and researchers are offering personally meaningful ways for us to question and change the ways in which we understand our selves and our work. Together, we can encounter new ideas and learn about our selves in new ways.

Co-flexivity affords us opportunities to decide when and where we want to actively transform our practices and also, the manner in which we deem appropriate to move for our generative performances. These potentially transforming moments are typically nonlinear, complex, layered, and polyvocal (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014c). They are different from the mechanised production line model where there are predetermined recipes to generate guaranteed success. Transformation often includes moving across disciplinary as well as traditional research paradigm borders. The crossing over movements and moments occur because of our need to explore our positions differently and these positions are often best expressed through creative media, such as poems or drawings.

We view our reflexive collaboration in self-study research as essentially transgressive as we unlearn and unknow, question, and open ourselves to new ways of thinking; challenging in the process, oppressive aspects of more conventional educational research (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009). Lather (1993, p. 676) put forward the notion of “transgressive validity” in research, and suggested that validity in research could be seen as its capacity to transgress, contest, disrupt existing conceptions and search for new possibilities. Thus research is seen as a political endeavour—and in our research group, collective inquiry offers us the space for such risk taking and to resist dominant research paradigms and epistemologies we encounter daily in our work.

*Dialogue Five: You’re Turning Your Inside Out, How Easy Can That Be?*

*Relebohile:* Most of our students have to deal with emotions in their self-study research. Is it because most of our students and us are faced with troubling contexts or troubling knowledge and our research focuses on this?

*Kathleen:* I find that self-study is a very emotional process.

*Inbanathan:* Yes.

*Kathleen:* And you shouldn’t enter into it to lightly. You have to have a certain amount of ...

*Daisy:* Courage ...

*Kathleen:* And resilience. So, it’s not for everybody.

*Daisy:* For some people, it’s just too scary.

*Theresa:* But also, I think that when you have a student who is not forthcoming with much, that becomes more frustrating because, as the supervisor, you are encouraging, you are trying to get them to write something that you can work with. And then you just get stuck. You can’t do it for them.

*Inbanathan:* That is the challenge and that’s what calls for the supervisor to be self-reflexive—as to how you’re going to change that situation.

*Kathleen:* But I don’t think you can always necessarily change it. I guess there are times when the self-study process just doesn’t flow. So, I think it’s important to acknowledge that it’s always going to be hard work, for the student and the supervisor.

*Daisy:* And yet, the perception is that self-study is so easy. But you’re turning your inside out, how easy can that be?

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

In self-study, reflecting on lived experiences and events is often accompanied by emotional connections. In South Africa, where high levels of traumatic stress are

an unfortunate part of everyday life across communities (Collins, 2013; Kaminer & Eagle, 2010), inquiry into lived experiences can be emotionally risky for students and supervisors. While emotional care is essential for student resilience, we acknowledge that as supervisors we also need to cultivate emotional self-care (Rager, 2005). Working in a co-flexive space can provide support for development of courage, resilience, and growth of the researcher and supervisor, whilst concurrently developing new contributions for generative research. Through collective inquiry in selected border spaces, body, mind, and heart come into play and critical engagement (hooks 1994).

We come back from our time together inspired, invigorated, ready to face multiple challenges. To return to the core message of our initial poem—Care is at the centre of it all—what we have realised is that capacity building for self-study supervisors and researchers very much depends on relational caring and interacting with each other.

#### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In concluding the chapter and considering possible implications for ourselves and others, we return to the three prompts we used to elicit responses to our first cocomposed poem. Thus, we ask:

- What does the chapter say?
- How does it say it?
- Is it worth saying?

##### *What Does the Chapter Say?*

In this chapter, we have made visible how we used collective found poems and reflexive dialogues to represent and make meaning of our emergent notion of co-flexivity, and the difference it makes to us as self-study supervisors. We have shown that in order to extend our research supervision to knowledge creating, we used collective poetic inquiry and reflexive dialogue as co-flexive research methods to enhance our polyvocal professional learning. The poem making and dialogues allowed us to be co-flexive about our border-crossing experiences as self-study supervisors and researchers, and uncovered embedded tensions and complexities of supervising self-study research.

There were diverse voices at play in our process of knowledge generation, and we were cautious not to integrate them into one all-encompassing account. Our collaborative, multi-voice process reflects the power of polyvocality in professional learning and development. As a group of self-study supervisors from diverse disciplines and subject positions, we were able to engage in dialogic praxis, bringing a multiplicity of standpoints, interpretations, and agencies to bear on our collective engagement. We journeyed in and out of the uncertainties, tensions, and complexities of self-study research supervision, raising complex epistemological and theoretical questions in the process.

*How Does It Say It?*

Through the creative media of poems and dialogues, we were able to condense and articulate significant aspects of a complex, polyvocal conversation that took place among the 10 of us over a 10-month period. The use of poems and dialogues assisted us in our quest to offer an evocative and multifaceted account of our experiences of learning through and about co-flexivity. We also see the poems and dialogues as portals through which readers can enter into the particularity and complexity of our experiences (Pithouse, 2007). Thus, the poems and dialogues served as a means for us to invite readers into the human interaction and relationships that are at the heart of our co-flexive experiences.

As described by Blair et al. (2011), coauthoring this chapter required us to move between “stepping up and stepping back to ensure polyvocality” (p. 150). Stepping up can be seen in the poems and dialogues and stepping back is evident in our demonstration of how we worked together to compose the series of poems, as well as in the interpretive portrayal that follows each dialogue.

*Is It Worth Saying?*

Certainly, this collaborative inquiry has had benefits for us as self-study supervisors in the TES project. Informed by the work of Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, and Stackman (2003), first, we see how our collective self-study has enhanced our analyses of issues and helped to bring depth and complexity into our work. Second, our exploration and articulation of co-flexivity as a key principle of our collective work has made us more mindful of the value of listening to and valuing multiple voices and perspectives. We have become more aware of how our collective self-study research across diverse higher education institutions and disciplines can provide us with opportunities to build a more holistic and deeper understanding of our practice as self-study supervisors. Third, as our discussion above suggests, self-study is emotive because it exposes the researcher to introspection and self-critique as well as criticism by other scholars and peers. Furthermore, it involves negotiating the complexities of a multiplicity of voices in a process of dialogic engagement between self and other, and the tensions and dilemmas within the self. Additionally, for us and for our students, it often brings to the fore strongly emotive issues from our teaching and social relationships. Thus, a significant realisation for us has been the social and emotional support that working together has provided us as collaborators over a number of years. Mutual trust, respect, and an ethic of care that has deepened and strengthened over the years of working together has helped to ameliorate possible power differentials amongst the collaborators that could potentially silence some of us. In essence, like Gerbic and Maher (2008, p. 321), we believe that our collective self-study has encouraged “wider participation, ensure[d] increased commitment to [a] project, produce[d] more rigorous analysis and evaluation and better support[ed] [our] professional development.”

But, we also need to consider potential implications beyond the TES project and our own work as self-study supervisors. As Mitchell and Weber remind us, “looking inward can lead to a more intelligent and useful *outward gaze*” (2005, p. 4). How might this account of our collective inquiry into co-flexivity in a transdisciplinary self-study research supervision community potentially benefit others? Methodologically, we have attempted to write this chapter in a transparent and demonstrative way so that it shows rather than just tells about our co-flexive praxis. We hope that it will serve as an accessible resource for others who are interested in polyvocal and creative approaches in self-study research. Conceptually, we offer our learning about co-flexivity in self-study supervision as a contribution to continuing scholarly conversations about the significance of collaboration in self-study. While collaboration is well established as a core principal of self-study research (LaBoskey, 2004), our collective self-study draws attention to the value of co-flexivity (collective reflexivity) for those who supervise or facilitate others’ self-study research.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chapter consultants: Ann Marie Stanley and Colleen M. Conway.

We gratefully acknowledge support and grant funding for TES project activities from the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa (Grant Number 90380), the Durban University of Technology’s Research Office, the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s University Learning and Teaching Office (UTLO), and Walter Sisulu University’s Research Office. We further acknowledge that any opinion, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and therefore the funders of the TES project activities do not accept any liability in regard thereto.

We thank Anastasia P. Samaras for her constructive and enlightening feedback on drafts of this chapter.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The following definition of transdisciplinary research aptly captures our understanding of the transdisciplinary nature of the TES project: “research efforts conducted by investigators from different disciplines working jointly to create new conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and translational innovations that integrate and move beyond discipline-specific approaches to address a common problem” (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/trec/about-us/definitions/>).
- <sup>2</sup> The southern African concepts of *Ubuntu* (in the Nguni languages) and *botho* (in the Sotho and Tswana languages) recognise self as ongoing, and relational processes of becoming (Mkhize 2004).

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