LESLEY WOOD

# 8. TRANSFORMING IDEAS OF RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A FACULTY OF EDUCATION

*An Autoethnographic Study*

## INTRODUCTION

As a relatively recent appointee in a merged university in South Africa, my job description as a research professor mandates me to build research capacity within the Faculty of Education, and to "lead through research" (R. Balfour, personal communication, October 7, 2012). For someone who is passionate about the generation of knowledge for social and educational transformation, this is an ideal job. However, it is not necessarily an easy one in a climate where ideas about research and academia are rather more traditional and rigid than my own. In this chapter, I present an autoethnographic account (Belbase, Luitel, & Taylor, 2013) of learning as I critically reflected on my own practice to find answers to the many questions I grappled with as I tried to build a body of research, and researchers interested in participatory, engaged research with people to bring about contextually and culturally relevant change. An autoethnographic pedagogy (Armstrong, 2008) promotes "dialogue, collaboration and relationship" (Ashton & Denton, 2006, p. 4), very necessary in our times of "super diversity" (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1025). It also allows us to expose "power-based lies" (Pelias, 2004, p. 25) about the exclusive value of positivistic and objective conceptions of research. It has enabled me to "wonder about myself" (Hunt, 2014, p. 3) and to share my own experience with others who might be able to learn from it. As Hunt (2014, p. 6) said, autoethnography "is a useful approach to professional education and lifelong learning."

Drawing on entries in my reflective diary and visualisation techniques such as drawing (Chang, 2008), I explain how reflecting on this data helped me to understand better my leadership practices and my interaction with others, allowing me to make positive adaptations. As an action researcher, I am in the habit of reflecting on my practice at least on a monthly basis. Critical self-reflection took me on a journey of self-discovery, which I believe has helped me to be better able to influence the emergence of a vibrant research community committed to conducting research with people to help them find ways to improve complex social issues that impact on their well-being.

*D. Pillay et al. (Eds.), Academic Autoethnographies, 117–132.*

## INTRODUCING MY IDEAS OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

My research interests focus on the promotion of psychosocial wellness within various education contexts. Previously a social worker, I was asked to join the academy as a lecturer on a life skills course in a foundation programme. After completing my doctorate in education, I was approached to join the Faculty of Education, primarily to develop programmes on HIV and AIDS for teachers, a topic no other academic appeared willing to take on, presumably because they did not perceive it as being relevant to the core discipline of education. Seeing it as an opportunity to really help teachers cope with the educational consequences of the pandemic, I threw myself wholeheartedly into this emerging field of research. Based on my social work training, my research naturally took a participative, emancipatory slant, and I gravitated towards paradigms that foregrounded educational research as social change (Schratz & Walker, 1995), using participatory methods that enabled participants to be active agents in the change they desired. Action research became my methodology of choice and I began to gain some degree of academic status by publishing regularly in this field, particularly linked to HIV and AIDS in education. And so, in 2012, I was asked to apply for my current post as research professor on the grounds of my success in leading and publishing in these fields. Because it is in my nature to continually move myself out of my comfort zone, and because I knew the faculty was focusing on improving its performance in terms of research outputs, I accepted—not without some trepidation.

## MY INITIAL PERCEPTIONS

The first difficulty I encountered in my new position was adapting to the hierarchic power relations—colleagues did not call directors or professors by their first name; they also seemed hesitant to challenge existing viewpoints and procedures, accepting the decisions of their "superiors" as gospel. Often, when I suggested that things might be done differently, I was told: "That is not the way things are done around here." I felt very frustrated in such a climate, and naturally gravitated towards a few other colleagues who I guessed felt much the same as I did. We all felt like outsiders, for various reasons, and took solace in being able to discuss our feelings openly with each other. However, I did not want such conversations to be a breeding ground for more discontent and knew I had to find another way to come to terms with my feelings.

I also experienced existing structures, systems, and ideologies set up to promote research, as exclusionary. The university encouraged the setting up of official research focus areas, and colleagues whose scholarly interests lay elsewhere tended to feel excluded, leading to negative attitudes towards research and the research entities. The majority of staff were not engaged in regular research activities (only 37 out of 130 academic staff members were involved in the faculty entity) and consequently tended not to consider themselves as being part of the researchers. Thus, as a research

mentor, I had to expend a considerable amount of energy on containing feelings emanating from past hurts, and helping people perceive themselves as having a valuable contribution to make in terms of research. I continually had to draw on my social work training to empathise and support.

Another thing that worried me was how the core areas of research, teaching, and community engagement were viewed. Because I see them as different sides of the same coin, so to speak, it follows that a transformed teaching curriculum will influence the type of research and community engagement that is being conducted, and vice versa. The key performance indicators of academics have been revised to include community engagement, in addition to teaching and research (Council for Higher Education, 2010). My thinking is in line with Subotzky (1999, p. 402) who maintained these three areas can easily be merged through universities becoming "more responsive to societal needs" via Mode 2 knowledge production, driven by social rather than discipline-specific needs. An example: When I made enquiries about how HIV and AIDS were included in the curriculum, I was told a decision had been taken to exclude the topic because of external parental pressure—notwithstanding the fact that policy requires it to be infused in all higher education programmes (HEAIDS, 2010), and research that shows it is sorely needed for South African teachers to be able to deal with its impact on education and learners (Theron, 2007; Wood, 2012). If the curriculum does not change in line with societal needs, then our graduates will not be equipped to act as agents of social change towards a more just and equitable society. Furthermore, a narrow discipline-specific approach does not encourage academics who design the curriculum, to critically reflect on their practice and the social relevance of the curriculum. Critical self-reflection is also a rich source of research that is being overlooked (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Many changes have taken place in higher education in South Africa since 1994 (Jansen, 2004), including increased demand for transformation of higher education to be more in line with the values and rights espoused in the South African Constitution (1996). Thus, I think that, as academics, we have a responsibility to critically reflect on our activities to make them more aligned with the democratic values embodied in our constitution, with the ultimate goal of creating a more just and humane society. I also had concerns about how service learning was being presented—as a form of "upliftment" of the less fortunate, rather than as a means of providing a profound and life-changing learning experience for both students and the school communities with whom they engaged. A presentation by final year students convinced me that the engagement was student-centred rather than involving the school community by assessing their needs, or learning how to meet them and how to sustain change. A couple of the students did report that when they left the school, their changes were "undone" and were perplexed as to why. A more participatory approach to community engagement could open up areas for research to promote social change (Schratz & Walker, 1995).

I began to mull over how I could be influential in introducing ideas and paradigms about research, teaching, and community engagement that would allow colleagues

to research their own practice and to work collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders to promote transformation both within and beyond the institution. I wanted to be able to influence the thinking of colleagues around their ability to conduct research that would be meaningful for both their own development and for the development of the students and communities they work with. I wanted to influence the research climate of the faculty to make it more in line with the espoused values of the university: human dignity, equality, freedom, integrity, tolerance, respect, commitment to excellence, scholarly engagement, academic freedom, and justice. The above concerns strengthened my desire to embody democratic values to unleash the transformative potential of educational research. I was therefore prompted to ask myself:

- How can I make research a more inclusive, equitable, and welcoming activity, while working within the current systems?
- How can I shift thinking about research and selves as researchers so that it is more in line with the transformative values that inform policy?

I reflected on these questions at regular intervals over a period of 2 years, beginning in November 2012. Of course, my personal research paradigm underpins my concerns. What concerns me, does not necessarily concern my colleagues or students. I am an outsider in many ways: my home language is different from the language of teaching at the institution and the preferred language of most of my colleagues; my formative years were spent in another country; my professional training has been in social work, rather than teaching; and I hold very definite views about the need to conduct research that promotes educational and social transformation, rather than just produce knowledge for academic purposes. I decided I would have to practice what I was preaching—action leadership.

## MY CONCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Zuber-Skerritt (2012) positioned transformative, emancipatory action research as a philosophy that informs methodology. It becomes a lifelong habit of enquiry, leading to the growth and development of self to be more aligned with democratic and inclusionary values. This personal process of transformation enables us to practice "authentic leadership" (MacFarlane, 2014, p. 2) which is values-based, holistic, and person-centred. Zuber-Skerritt (2011) preferred the term *action leadership*, that promotes transformative learning through the facilitation of action learning sets that provide a space for people to connect, cooperate, and communicate, learning from and with each other. I conceptualise action research as an emancipatory, values-based project—whether for professional development purposes (McNiff, 2013) or as a means of community engagement—in collaboration with others for mutual learning and action to reach democratically negotiated outcomes (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Action leadership requires the leader to be an active participant in the change process through modelling the processes and principles of action

research. Learning from and in action (Schön, 1995) is achieved through critical self-reflection and reflexive dialogue (Winter, 1989) with others. As a research professor, I wanted to be a critic, an advocate of new ideas, and to transgress boundaries (MacFarlane, 2012) through action leadership.

I also find aspects of invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996) useful to operationalise action leadership. Invitational leadership is based on principles fundamental to action research—respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality. *Respect* means dealing with others in a way that promotes open communication and welcomes diverse opinions; *trust* refers to confidence in own judgment and in the ability of others to perform well if a conducive climate is created; *optimism* means being able to imagine successful outcomes and to persevere in face of adversity; *intentionality* refers to making conscious decisions to attain the vision for change. Invitational theory also teaches us that people are always motivated to act (or not) and that just because they do not act in a way that we want them to, does not mean they are not motivated, just that they have a different motivation. Thus, I have to accept that colleagues are free to accept or reject my leadership, but that does not mean that I have to abandon my vision. As an action leader, I need to practice what I preach by modelling what I expect from others. I have to be person-centred yet strategic and, most of all, I have to persevere because change does not happen overnight.

Bennis (2000) defined a leader as someone who is excited about reaching a vision and encouraging others to work collaboratively towards it. My vision, based on my own experience of action research and its transformative potential, was to encourage research that integrated teaching and community engagement with the ultimate aim of influencing positive social change towards a more equitable and just society. By engaging collaboratively with communities to co-create knowledge, we research new contextually and culturally relevant ways to improve social circumstances. This knowledge enhances our learning and informs what we teach our students.

Yet, leadership was a relatively new role for me. In my few years in higher education, I had built up an impressive academic record, but that was mostly through working independently on developing my research portfolio. Although I had worked in research teams on specific projects, and even led some, I had never been responsible for developing research capacity in colleagues, most of who had been in the academy much longer than I had. An extract from my reflective diary in my early days in this position reflects my uncertainty about this:

> This stage in my career as an academic is a critical one. I made the choice to move from a very safe space to embark on a challenging adventure in a new environment. The decision to accept an appointment as research professor places me in a vulnerable position. I know that I have a need to perform, and I expect that many people are waiting for me to perform and this is causing me to panic somewhat. I have to learn to be my authentic self and continue doing what I have been doing up to now—working hard, engaging wholeheartedly in new research opportunities, constantly looking for new ways to develop and

learn as a researcher, and drawing strength to do this from working with like-minded people. (December, 2012)

I decided that I needed to draw on my knowledge of action leadership to find ways to inspire others, to invite them to try something new, to join me in stepping out of their comfort zone. I could quell my fears by approaching this job as an action research exercise: by first taking time to observe and learn before acting intentionally to try and create opportunities for others to engage in learning about research, teaching, and community engagement—opportunities that would allow them to become excited about research and see how they could integrate these three core areas. I would do my best to live up to the following description of an action leader: "Action leaders delight in helping others succeed. They are experienced, wise and other-centred rather than self-centred" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013, p. 229).

## A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Because emotionality can be a barrier to learning and thinking (Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & van de Ruit, 2012), I knew I had to deal with my own feelings of exclusion. I decided to do a narrative drawing to help me to become aware of my thoughts and feelings about my current situation, and what and how I needed to begin to change. This free drawing was a way to visualise my self within my social ecology (Chang, 2008) and so be able to unpack its meaning in relation to my professional learning and practice. Figure 8.1 shows the drawing and narrative.

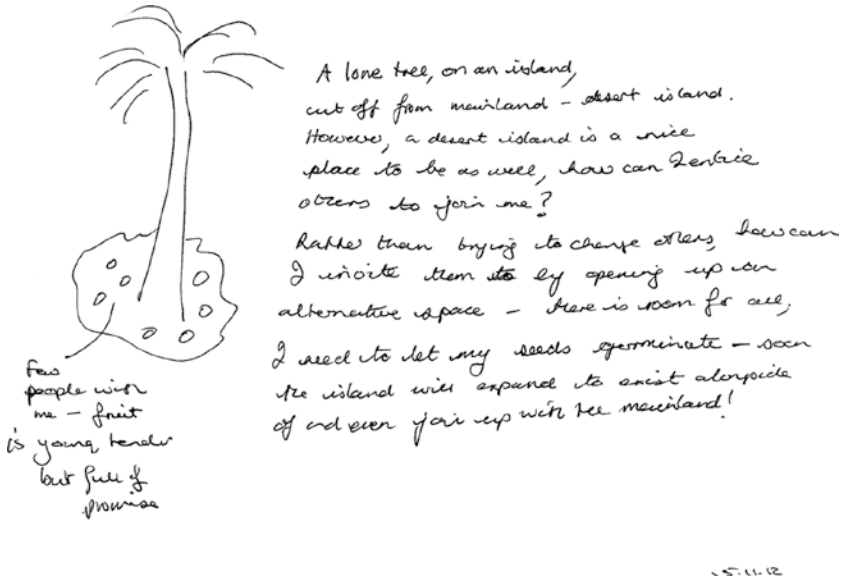


*Figure 8.1. Dealing with feelings of exclusion*

As I wrote the narrative, I found myself reframing the desert island to be a desirable place rather than a lonely outpost. I began to understand that I could offer something different without having to change the whole system. This autoethnographic approach allowed me to see that I was in fact not practicing what I preached. I started to see myself as others might perceive me—arrogant and inflexible—rather than adopting a dialogic and reflexive stance, as befits an action researcher. Why should I try to change others to think the way I was thinking? That assumes I believe that my paradigm is right and theirs is wrong. I was reminded of the words of Catherine Odora-Hoppers (2005) who said that we should not be creating polemic, but a space where we can all express our diverse views, learning from each other, rather than making the intellectual project a win or lose debate. At this time, I was reminded of an image I had used a few months earlier as part of a photovoice exercise with colleagues in an HIV and AIDS community of practice, when we were documenting our feelings and knowledge about leading change in HIV and AIDS education (see Figure 8.2).

*Figure 8.2. Change as an impossible effort*

I had depicted change as an almost impossible effort; it was taking all my strength to try to convince others of the need to integrate HIV into the curriculum. Looking again at this photograph, and comparing my thinking at that time with what I had depicted in my drawing, it became clear to me that, if I wanted to be an action leader,

I did not actually have a right to suggest others needed to change. I had to change myself, live out my own values through my research, do my work with integrity and be inviting, rather than enter into a debate that sapped my strength and created more opposition. Unwittingly, I had become a "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 1989, p. 49), intent on changing others rather than aligning myself to my values of inclusivity and embracing diversity.

I saw the need to shift the focus of my research questions to find ways to share my experience of research as an exciting, doable, and worthwhile activity for those who felt an affinity to values similar to my own—to add to and enrich the smorgasbord of paradigms we were using to address the complex problems we were facing as educational researchers. I adapted my questions to read:

- How can I *offer* research as a more inclusive, equitable, and welcoming activity to *add to our diversity of knowledge*?
- How can I *add* thinking about research and selves as researchers so that *it encourages others* to conduct research that is ultimately aimed at social and educational improvement?

What did I do to try to find answers to these questions? Change is a process rather than a one-off occurrence, and I had to intentionally set this process in motion to explore answers to my research questions. I now understood what my wise dean had meant by leading through research. I would have to provide opportunities for colleagues who would like to engage with my understanding of research to become aware of different possibilities and deepen their understanding of participatory and emancipatory forms of research; create opportunity for them to apply their learning and, ultimately, develop an identity for themselves as researchers, who can in turn mentor others. I had to remind myself what I had written in my reflection just before I joined the faculty (see earlier excerpt), and start to do it, rather than just talk about it—be authentic, engage in new opportunities, look for ways to learn and develop myself so that I can lead others to do the same. In the following sections, I explain what I did, why I did it, and provide some evidence of how my colleagues and students have perceived my action.

### *Integrating Teaching and Research*

Because I was aware that many of my colleagues had heavy teaching loads and did not see how they could take on the additional task of research, I wanted to provide opportunity for them to understand that these activities can, and should, be integrated. As I listened to colleagues speak, I heard comments such as "research is difficult," "not everyone can do it," "I have never had to do it, so why must I start now?" Research became an important output in annual performance management agreements, and many people felt forced to do it. I knew that self-reflective forms of action research provide ways to integrate teaching and research, creating publishable knowledge to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Drawing on my

knowledge of invitational theory (Novak, 2005), I knew that I had to be strategic and person-centred, and persevere in providing action leadership based on the democratic and life-enhancing values of action research.

I made a strategic decision to bring in esteemed international experts (Jean McNiff and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt) in the field of action research for professional learning to present workshops. I also presented introductory workshops, not only to my own faculty, but also in collaboration with the academic development department. In 2014, I and one of these experts were asked by the institutional office of the university to present workshops on action research for the scholarship of teaching and learning across all three campuses—an indication of how this approach is beginning to be recognised. I find, in general, that colleagues are very open to this form of research of which they were formerly not aware:

> Thank you—your presentation opened a new world for me! To stress the active part that I as a researcher play, was new and strange. (Participant, Faculty of Arts)

> I now understand what AR [action research] is! This methodology is definitely worthwhile in a HE [higher education] environment where we value change and improvement of practice. (Participant, Faculty of Economic Sciences)

I led by example by continuing to write and publish in action research. I also made a strategic decision to refuse a request to guest lecture students regarding HIV and AIDS in teaching. Instead, I suggested to this colleague that we research, together, how we could integrate HIV and AIDS into the curriculum of the programme through the specific module she taught. We did the investigation and I helped her to write an article that was duly published, providing a research output for the colleague.

I embodied a person-centred approach by having one-on-one consultations with people who wished to use action research as a way to improve teaching, inviting colleagues to regular action research "cafés" where we could chat informally about research issues, and generally investing time in providing a listening ear for colleagues who had been put off research through past experiences, or who did not perceive themselves to be researchers.

I had to persevere in my attempts to position action research as a viable and valid way to create scholarship. For example, in research committee meetings and ethics meetings I had to explain many times how the research process and validation methods for action research differ from more traditional, objective methodologies. Several times, critical readers of student proposals requested the removal of the "I," criticised the narratives as "too personal," and questioned the fact that participants were acknowledged in visual and written format. I was patient in educating those who were more used to quantitative or traditional qualitative paradigms; I used external critical readers who were prolific publishers in action research, and used my own publications to validate how this enabled the creation of knowledge that was valued by academia. I knew I was making some progress

when my students began to receive compliments rather than criticism from fellow colleagues:

> This is the most enjoyable proposal I have ever read—in fact I read it twice! And it is a very sound piece of work. (Colleague, and critical reader of AR proposal)

*Integrating Teaching, Research, and Community Engagement*

The requirement to include community engagement as part of an academic's workload has been generally perceived as an added burden by many (Fourie, 2003). However, action research allows the three core activities to be integrated. I was strategic in volunteering to head the service learning committee, which allowed me to ensure that the service learning projects were designed to produce research outputs, thus integrating teaching, research, and community engagement (Waterman, 2014). I also engaged students and colleagues in projects with a service learning or community engagement focus, and assisted them to publish their findings. I have persevered in promoting action research as an integrated approach to engaged scholarship over the past 2 years, and I believe it is beginning to be accepted by colleagues as a valid, and even desirable, methodology:

> I think AR is not only research, but going out and making a change. You have to stop referring to the general, you have to look at yourself; values play an important role in teaching and understanding your students. (Colleague in AR project)

*Changing Ideas about Research and Self as Researcher*

Over the last couple of years, I have persevered with students and colleagues to build their trust in me as academic leader, and in the methodology of action research. It has not been easy because most of the established researchers were already in the existing research entity, and those outside of it did not have strong identities as researchers. I made the strategic decision to begin a new research entity to include those who had hitherto felt excluded—rather than taking the easy way and becoming part of the existing, strong unit I was recruited to join. We now have three experienced researchers in this new faculty project, and we have successfully applied for a focus area in conjunction with Health Sciences, meaning that we are now an interdisciplinary unit conducting research to promote community wellness. The difficult and lonely times are forgotten when I receive unsolicited feedback such as the following e-mail:

> Don't you ever leave us—we need you here! Thanks for introducing me to action research and photovoice—I think I am going to enjoy research now! I have been struggling with my proposal for 2 years and now I am done after 6 months! (Colleague, coauthor, and doctoral candidate)

I also strategically applied for a National Research Foundation (NRF) community engagement grant that allowed me to actively promote action research within the institution and nationally through organising seminars, conferences, workshops, and supporting colleagues and students to network with internationally acclaimed action researchers. I also led my projects in a person-centred way, promoting symmetrical and less formal communication as opposed to the traditional hierarchic communication colleagues had been used to. One of the principles of action research is action learning through small collaborative groups (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013), and these democratic and dialogic action learning sets were a feature of all my research. I thought the best way to help colleagues forge an identity as researchers, was to support them in publication. I encouraged people to publish—looking for potential rather than judging them on their past performance. Reflections by members of these action learning sets indicate that they found this to be a "humanising" space where they could learn and grow:

> I think we feel comfortable with one another and there is a genuine support atmosphere amongst the group. (Doctoral candidate, NRF project)

> What I also must say is the way some have just blossomed in the P [participatory action research] group makes me feel proud to be part of it. (Colleague, NRF project)

> These shared reflections enhance our meetings and my overall experience of being part of this group tremendously. I cannot overstate how impressed I am by how well the reflections work to create group cohesion and familiarity amongst members. I can identify with the experiences the members reflect on and feel as though we are undergoing this research journey together. (Master's student, NRF project)

I was generous with my material and intellectual resources. For example, I funded my colleagues and students in their projects, and brought academics to the university who I knew would inspire them; I lent equipment, did critical reading for those not under my official mentorship, and regularly shared articles and other resources electronically. When one of my students was struggling to find a research site in this area, I organised for her to work in a school in another province where I knew the principal was an ardent action researcher, supporting her travel expenses from my research budget. I was gratified when the principal reported to her in an e-mail that one of the heads of department (HODs) in the school said the highlight of the academic year for him was working on the project with the student—which helped him to improve his practice. The student responded that she felt they both owed a lot to my mentorship and guidance,

> because all that happened at your school is demonstrating that her roots are growing deeper and are also spreading widely. This denotes that her wisdom spread from the university through a student to your school through HODs and teachers and will spread to the community through learners. (Doctoral candidate, unsolicited e-mail, 4 December, 2014)

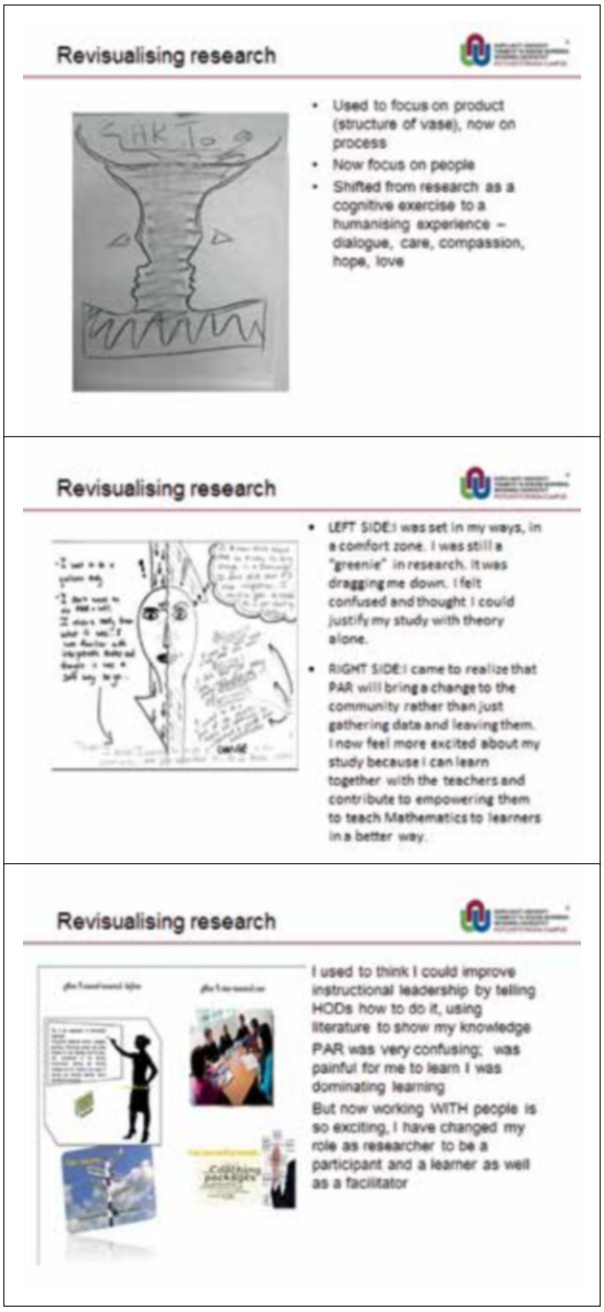


*Figure 8.3. Visualising change in thinking of postgraduate students*

Although I was rather embarrassed by her profuse expression of admiration, I was interested to see that she also used the metaphor of a tree to describe my influence on learning. She had not seen my reflective drawing, nor had I shared my use of the metaphors (see Figures 8.1 and 8.4) with her. I found this to be motivating for me, because it gave me hope that my vision was slowly taking shape. Figure 8.3 offers some evidence of the change in thinking about research of three of my postgraduate students who used visualisation (Chang, 2008) to reflect on how working with me had changed their perceptions of research.

## AN ONGOING JOURNEY OF REFLECTION

I do not want to present this narrative as a self-congratulatory story. I know that in action research there are no final solutions, just "temporary resting places" (Elliott, 1990, p. 7). Making an intentional effort to use autoethnographic strategies such as the creation of visual artefacts and critical self-reflection helped me to explore my own learning and live out the values I profess in my research, rather than fall into the trap of complaining and judging others. I have learned to be inviting, to share my ideas rather than try to change those whose paradigms might differ to mine, but are just as worthy of my respect. This was, and remains difficult for me, because I frequently felt (and still feel) like an outsider due to my language, culture, and history.

To be inviting also means to be optimistic and able to imagine successful outcomes. It requires resilience to persevere in face of adversity and, often, I did experience what Stern (2014, p. 5) called "research viciousness" where colleagues make unkind or insensitive remarks about other staff members' ability to do research or about the value of participatory or self-study forms of research. I survived by creating a support network both within and without the university through joining national and international networks, attending conferences, hosting a World Congress of Action Learning and Action Research, and generally taking leadership in action research in South Africa. By gaining recognition for my research publications, I think I was able to better position action research as a meaningful endeavour. There will always be people who see transformation and change as being mutually exclusive in their idea of quality education, but I have learned to follow my own vision and let others follow theirs.

I now present a visualisation I recently composed to explain how I have changed my practice in an attempt to answer my research questions (see Figure 8.4). This image is very different from my drawing of the lone palm tree on a desert island. I am now rooted, more like the oak trees that line the streets around our campus than the alien palm of before. I am happy to realise that I have learned to live more fully in the direction of my professed values, rather than fighting against a system I imagined I had to change. I am now working on "growing my own timber" by collaborating with like-minded colleagues across the divide (there actually is a railway line that separates Education from other faculties on campus). I have attracted two strong

education researchers to my education niche area and together we are leading students and colleagues in publishing and securing funded projects to promote our vision of helping people to improve their own educational and social circumstances. We are working across disciplines and learning from, and feeding back into, the other research entities in education. The picture might have looked very different if I had not used an autoethnographic approach that allowed me to place myself as the object of critique.

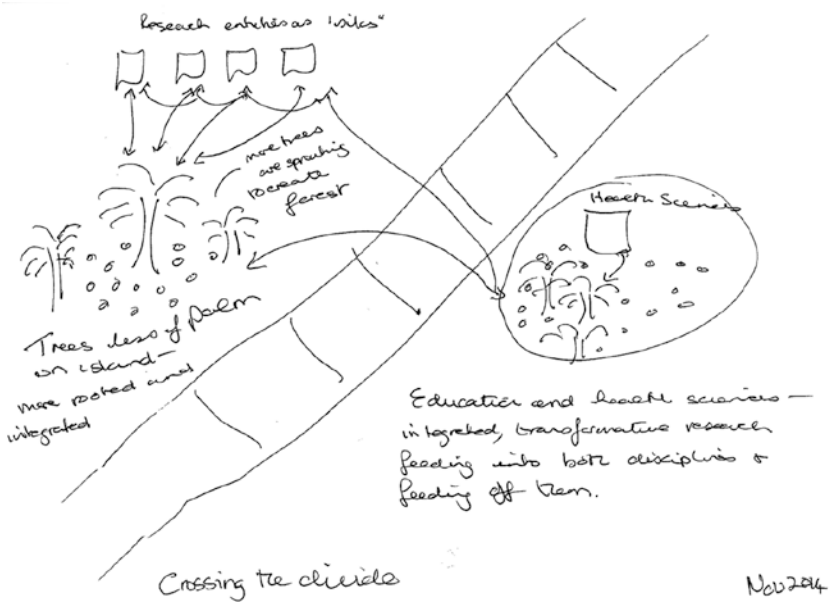


*Figure 8.4. Closing the divide*

## WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MY LEARNING AND HOW CAN YOU TRUST MY STORY?

Doing this autoethnographic enquiry has helped me understand myself better as I become accountable for my actions and interactions. It has helped me to think deeply about my motivations, my visions, and my paradigms and allowed me to find ways to pursue my goals while living in harmony with my fellow academics. I have no doubt that this form of learning would be invaluable for our students because it "permits researchers to apply flexible modes of inquiry from their life experiences [to effect change] in educational institutions and classroom practices" (Belbase et al., 2013, p. 86). I have explained the actions I took to answer my research questions, and offered evidence to support my claims. I hope my story comes across as authentic, believable, and possible—three validating criteria of narrative forms of research suggested by Ellis (1995). My story has catalytic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005)

if you believe I have offered evidence that I have been able to encourage others to broaden their thinking about what constitutes valid academic research and, perhaps, to try new ideas out in practice. It was a challenge to write this story without sounding arrogant or defensive. My story will have rhetoric and personal validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005) if you, as reader, are convinced that I managed to stay true to my professed values as I strived to improve my practice. However you judge it, I offer it as an explanation of how I learned to be a better leader of research by being critically reflexive about my practice. Autoethnography has been described as being able to arouse "pedagogical thoughtfulness and wakefulness" (Belbase et al., 2013, p. 94), and it certainly helped me to be more alert to how my practice influenced those around me. As Willis, (2004, p. 323) attested, academic learning is about "deeper changes in the inner self of the …researcher. It is to a greater or lesser extent, a road of transformation." I hope my autoethnographic story may entice you to embark on a similar journey of learning and growth.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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