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'Looking for Anchors': Using Reciprocal Poetic Inquiry to Explore the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Our Educator-Artist Selves

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ABSTRACT

As collaborative theatre-makers, university teachers, and researchers in South Africa, our symbiotic, interactive relationship has shaped the construction of our academic identities. The displacement caused by social distancing regulations and repeated government-mandated lockdowns, as well as our own shifting circumstances, have forced us to re-examine these academic identities as we negotiate the challenges of working together while not being able to inhabit the same physical space. In this study, we work dialogically, collaboratively and reciprocally, to interrogate our identities as educators in a creative discipline. Using poetic inquiry and *reciprocal found poetry*, we examined our teaching experiences in the moment of rupture created by the Covid-19 pandemic. We explore how we are (re)learning and (re)imagining who we are as teachers and what we do with, and for, our students, through interrogating our lived experiences in poetic form. In so doing, we recognize how, by accepting fluidity and contingency, having an ethic of care for ourselves and for our students, accepting our vulnerability, and trusting our resilience, we begin to find the positives, and to embrace, rather than resist, the challenges we are facing. Our process of creating our *reciprocal found poems* and the use of dialogue as a mode of analysis and meaning-making offer a methodological approach that others may find useful in developing their poetic self-study research.

We are collaborative theatre-makers, teachers, and researchers, with a long-term relationship that has shaped our academic identities. Our friendship, shared values, beliefs, and perspectives have helped shape our role as educators and creative artists. Having worked as educators in Higher Education in South Africa for more than 20 years, our academic and personal identity is central to how we relate to each other and the world.

Our identity as educators is also deeply embedded in our discipline – theatre – and its very *liveness* – a living, immediate connection between audience and performer, between teacher and student. Teaching theatre asks that we engage with creative practice and theoretical knowledge simultaneously, in the making of performative knowledge that 'live[s] betwixt and between theory and theatricality, paradigms and practices, critical reflection and creative accomplishment' (Conquergood, 2002, p. 151).

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In our work, we constantly negotiate this 'commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing' (Conquergood, 2002, p. 151) as we make, teach, and research theatre and performance practice. A crisis within that delicate negotiation is the background of this study.

The critical events of 2020/2021, and our own shifting circumstances, have forced us to re-examine our academic identities as we negotiate the challenges of working in an uncharted landscape. Being physically separated from each other, and from our students, has disrupted the very sense of *liveness* and creative, collaborative connection that has been the bedrock of our decades of work.

Complicating our experience further, the context in which we teach is complex, characterized by a developing nation's logistical and socio-economic challenges. Our student body is largely impoverished, living in rural and urban settings. Students often have limited and unreliable access to electricity, Wi-Fi, or mobile phone signal, on which they rely for their online learning. While most of our students are multilingual and possess a range of linguistic resources, English is a third or fourth language for many, complicating understanding and effective communication.

Within this landscape, our personal contexts are different, although we teach in the same discipline, and at the time of this study, for the same university. Since the period in which this paper was written, Tanya has taken up a permanent post at the Durban University of Technology. This paper, therefore, reflects our experiences while teaching together at the University of KwaZulu-Natal during the 2020/2021 academic years.

Tamar is a full-time, permanent staff member who focuses mainly on teaching the *core* theory-based aspects of the undergraduate modules. Although the courses are usually taught face-to-face, during Covid, this shifted to large-group online lectures, recorded material, the setting of readings, and the design of theoretical and practical assessments. Tanya works on a part-time, adjunct basis. Her focus is on small-group teaching through live Zoom classes and WhatsApp groups of the practical assessment projects that form a key part of the Drama and Performance Studies programme. It should be noted that Under normal pre-Covid-19 conditions, all the staff would teach these different aspects of the course in a holistically connected manner. Under Covid conditions, however, there has been a sharp differentiation between theory and practice and how different staff members engage with the student body.

The displacement caused by social distancing regulations and repeated government-mandated lockdowns since March 2020 has left us dis-connected. We are left without the social and artistic cohesion and unity between ourselves, and between us and our students, upon which we have relied for much of our work. In this study, we explore how we are (re)learning and (re)imagining who we are as teachers and what we do with, and for, our students, in the light of these challenges, through interrogating our lived experiences within a framework of our co-creative scholarship.

We engage in a collaborative, arts-based self-study, using poetic inquiry as our primary methodology to explore our critical question, 'How do we negotiate our identity as educators in a creative discipline during the moment of rupture created by the Covid-19 pandemic?'. In so doing, we uncover how resilience, contingency, fluidity, caring, and vulnerability in our interactions, both with ourselves and our students, counterbalance the disjointedness of the current educational experience.

Self-Study of Creative Practice – Putting Our Selves in the Frame of Research

Our theoretical and methodological approach is in the self-study paradigm in which poetic inquiry is a widely recognized research method (see, Butler-Kisber, 2005; Edge & Olan, 2021; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019). We have been engaged in self-study research since 2011 (Meskin & Van der Walt, 2014, 2018; Van der Walt & Meskin, 2020), exploring, in particular, its applicability to creative artists and educators.

This study is part of our ongoing practice and research in this endeavour of 'methodological inventiveness' (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020, p. 430), adding to what we call *Self-Study of Creative Practice (S-SCP)*, to differentiate it from the origins of self-study in teacher education practice. In advocating for a wider self-study conversation, Kitchen (2020) points out that self-study is 'a practitioner research tradition that respects professional knowledge and agency' (p. 1039). Such thinking underpins our construction of S-SCP, particularly this study, which concerns questions of agency and knowledge within our educator-artist identities.

Poetic Inquiry – Putting Our Selves Into Words

Poetic inquiry is an arts-based research method that 'describes the use of both poetic and creative thinking to analyze and draw conclusions in research, as well as a way of understanding and communicating the subject matter being studied' (McCulliss, 2013, p. 83). We have explored various arts-based methods in our self-study research practice (Meskin, 2021 [playwriting]; Meskin & Van der Walt, 2010 [photographs], 2014 [theatre]; Meskin et al., 2017 [object inquiry]; Van der Walt, 2020 [concept mapping]; Van der Walt & Meskin, 2020 [object inquiry]). Arts-based methods are valuable because they 'have the potential to elicit deeper, more emotional, more reflexive accounts when compared to more traditional approaches to qualitative research' (Ward & Shortt, 2020, p. 2). Poetic inquiry, therefore, offers a means for confronting complex, emotional questions within a structure that frames those questions in rich, multi-levelled, metaphoric-laden language. As such, poems contain a vast amount of information in a compressed and weighted form, since, as Prendergast (2009) notes, 'poetry . . . [synthesizes] experience in a direct and affective way' (p. 545).

Our self-study practice is embedded in our collaborative partnership, which is relational, intentional, and allows for a plurality of voices and opinions, in a space of shared thinking, based on our mutual and interdependent friendship (Van der Walt, 2018). Collaboration is often cited as an important principle within self-study (Bodone et al., 2004; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016; Samaras, 2011). We engage in collaborative self-study to explore the dynamics and ramifications of our separate, yet shared, experiences of teaching drama remotely during a pandemic.

We see self-study through the lens of 'intimate scholarship' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015, p. 107), which 'is directed toward understanding experience or practice . . . . [making] implicit, tacit, and embodied knowledge explicit' (p. 155). Key to such scholarship is the understanding that 'the meaning reported concerning the experience is open' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015, p. 145). This requires a willingness to abandon the need for neat answers and surrender to 'the messiness, uncertainties, complexities, and elisions' (Samaras et al., 2014, p. 3) of the exploratory journey. To do so requires trust in the process, and even more so, in the person with whom one is traveling towards new meanings.

Critical Friendship and Dialogue – Talking Our Way to Understanding

A key aspect of self-study is critical friendship as both a research relationship and a means for ensuring trustworthiness and reliability, since it facilitates 'the action of repurposing, re-seeing, through the eyes of another, what has become invisible to the self' (Olan & Edge, 2019, p. 41). Our critical friendship is underpinned by the many years of working, teaching, writing and creating together that is the basis of our collaborative practice and new ideas (Van der Walt, 2018; Van der Walt & Meskin, 2020). Our poetic inquiry operates through the lens of this critical friendship as we share thoughts, feelings, words, and ideas about the crisis into which the pandemic has thrust us.

Dialogue is a core aspect of our critical friendship and our working practice as theatre-makers, where it is a central component of the art form. A dialogic stance is a natural fit for us in this study, where the dialogue becomes 'a meaning-making conversation, a back-and-forth of ideas, and in this back and forth, ideas are completed' (Olan & Edge, 2019, p. 41). This is in keeping with the need to engage in dialogic interaction in intimate scholarship, since dialogue is the 'coming-to-know process within intimate scholarship' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015, p. 145).

Pinnegar and Hamilton (2015) explain how the use of dialogue pushes 'our knowing into a zone of inclusivity where alternative and multiple views of what is and might be come in contact and interact with each other' (p. 147). Our collaborative partnership is a zone of inclusivity from within which we conduct our creative and research practice. In this space of inquiry, we 'take a stance of exploration by wondering, imagining, and questioning the ideas, experiences, and interpretations being considered' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015, p. 147). The process of exploration is followed by reflection through 'thoughtful examination expressed through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as well as through expressions of experience in examples, evidence or narratives' (p. 147). Thus, the process of intimate scholarship for us engages exploration, reflection, examination, and evaluation, undertaken through a primarily dialogic process.

Dialogue reflects the polyvocality (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019; Samaras & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020) inherent in our shared discussions around our research questions. Samaras and Pithouse-Morgan (2020) note that polyvocality 'has made visible how dialogic encounters with diverse ways of seeing, knowing, and doing can deepen and extend professional learning in self-study research' (p. 1297). They also note the necessity of 'multiple viewpoints . . . because they motivate scholars to consider and reconsider their individual epistemological and ontological stances' (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019, p. 6). Given that this article emerged out of an existential crisis in our sense of self as educator-artists, this reconsideration is particularly necessary, providing us with an understanding of the power of listening and responding in the meaning-making project. Our poetic inquiry is underpinned by an ongoing series of polyvocal dialogues – both poetic and non-poetic – that shape our critical friendship.

Writing Our Selves In/Through the Data

In embarking on our poetic inquiry, we wanted to use collaborative, dialogic, and reciprocal methods to create a single poem that we would then analyze together. We use Samaras' (2011) hermeneutic spiral as the framework for our discussion, moving

through the phases of questioning, discovering, framing, reframing, and revisiting (p. 72). Each stage of our process corresponds to a point in this spiral, using an instinctive and emergent process to create our poem(s) for analysis, moving slowly from the personal and separate, to the reciprocal and connected. In this way, we engage with the recursive nature of self-study, which 'turns back on itself to be useful both to the self-engaged in the practice and others who are practitioners' (Pinnegar et al., 2010, p. 205).

Our method involved making found poetry out of our own responsive writing. We adopted Edge and Olan's (2021) perspective where 'composing found poems was a metaphorical double-knitting process for analyzing and representing data; for studying the beginning, middle, and end products and process of inquiry' (p. 6). Found poetry, as described by Butler-Kisber (2002), 'takes the words of others and transforms them into poetic form' (p. 233); in our inquiry, however, we use our own words, as opposed to those of other participants. Nevertheless, we treated our source material – our free writing – as if it were participant-text, and committed ourselves not to tamper with that original source material. Thus, we avoided self-censorship since we agreed not to significantly alter the 'chained narrative' (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 234) that was our initial free writing. Our agreement bound how the poems could evolve, and facilitated the 'prismatic perspectives for us to converse through as critical friends' (Edge & Olan, 2021, p. 22).

Working within the hermeneutic spiral allowed us to change tactics and shift our approach as we felt our way to the final poem. Much of our discussion around this process happened through lengthy text messages on WhatsApp, as well as in-person meetings. These provided a dialogic space to share ideas, and engage in 'thinking together' (Van der Walt, 2018, p. 60). In so doing, we moved through the following phases, which allowed us to construct our poems.

Questioning: Freeing Our Writing Selves

We started with two individually written exercises. These allowed us to explore and interrogate our own feelings, ideas, and responses without influencing each other. The first of these was a free writing exercise, where we set a timer for five minutes, and wrote without interruption, trying to express our feelings about our teaching and our sense of ourselves as teachers.

The second exercise was inspired by a format in the work of Lorraine McKay (2021, p. 6), which provided prompts for a more structured piece of writing:

What I understand about myself and (about teaching)
I don't understand:
But most of all I don't understand:
What I understand most is:

Discovering: Finding the Poems

Having completed these two tasks separately, we constructed two found poems each, using the two writing exercises as source material for these. Using key phrases, words, and ideas from our writing exercises, we each constructed our poems, which we did not share at this point. We had decided that we would not try to conform to any specific style or

form of poetry, but would allow our poems to emerge organically from the process. Thus, our poems took different forms, reflecting the different ways we approached this task, and the different results that the exercise generated for each of us.

Tanya's Poems:

A Duty of Care

'Just do your best for the students'.
I will scream! I ALWAYS DO MY BEST
I don't know how to care enough for each student,
in the face of the tsunami of student need
There is no support
The real, intimate engagement with the students shifted
To teachers with the least say and least power.
Trying to make half-baked ideas work
It's totally out of touch
And always, constantly, day and night,
Students message, and ask, and demand, and need -
A never-ending litany of 'I don't understand'.

What I Understand

I don't understand how
To work any harder
To connect
To create
To cross the language barrier
I can't be in the same room as my students
But most of all I don't understand how
To take more and more strain
To be enough
To help
How can anyone think that real learning is taking place?
What I understand most is that
I am doing my best
My best is simply not enough
Nothing I could possibly do would ever be enough.

Tamar's poems:

I don't believe I know how to teach anymore

A blank screen inside and out:
Are they listening or even there?
Be inspiring, inspired
How … if there's nothing to go on
In this strange twilight moment of ennui?
Floundering,
Lost in the information,
A sea of knowledge
Floating,
Looking for anchors,
Not to weigh me down but ground my thoughts,
Sometimes I don't want to be here.
Pretending to know but not knowing,
Or knowing but forgetting.

Will they know? Will they see?
I'm not supposed to be afraid
(But) I have no idea how to reach them –
Their lives and mine, parallel lines – a parallelogram with no meeting point.
What language should I speak?
No words penetrate the silence.
Dark screens
Blankness –
Waiting –
Breathing in a panic –
Don't ask, don't tell, don't know.
I wonder if I'll ever feel OK again.

Understanding

I don't understand
How to do this bravely in this space of waking dreams
How to breathe when paralysis grips me even in thought
How to make a leap of faith I used to find so easy

But most of all I don't understand why they are so unwilling to meet me.

I'd rather watch cycling than teach,
Even though I used to feel like a teacher
I am missing
The path through the patterns the world moves in.
I need to step back.

What I most understand is that there's no learning happening here.
They need something I haven't discovered in myself yet
Losing myself in the mindlessness of doing

I need to remember
Find the memory of safety to step back into . . .
To figure out where next –
Or maybe it's nowhere and it's time to leave

Discovering, Continued: Reciprocal Found Poems

Because we are committed to the notion of reciprocal inquiry in our work (Meskin et al., 2014), we decided to create *reciprocal found poems*. We shared our free-writing exercises with each other, and each of us constructed a found poem from the other's writing. Only once this was done did we upload our poems to a shared Dropbox folder, where we were each able to read and think about the various poems produced thus far.

Tanya's found poem from Tamar's free write:
I know how to teach

I'm not supposed to be afraid anymore
Pretending to know, but not knowing
Will they know? Will they see?
Don't ask, don't tell, don't know.

How am I supposed to be inspiring, inspired
When there's nothing to go on?
Blankness, emptiness,
A blank screen inside and out.

Lost in a sea of information
Drifting in and out of moments
Floating freely looking for anchors that won't weigh me down.
So distant in space, time and knowing
Losing the thread of what matters
This strange twilight moment of loss and ennui.

I have no idea how to reach them –
Their lives and mine float in parallel lines
What languages should I speak?
Dark screens. Silence. Blankness.
Only waiting.

Tamar's found poem from Tanya's free write:

We have a duty of care for our students.
But -
How to care enough for *each* student?
I am just trying to get through every day . . .

A tsunami of student need -
Do more for them,
'Just do your best for them',
No support,
I will (want to) scream
I am <u>always</u> doing the very best that I can!
I am just trying to get through every day . . .

The burden of the intimate engagement –
The real teaching –
Shifted onto the teachers with the least say
And the least power
Over what and how.
I'm tired.
Trying to make it all work.
I am just trying to get through every day . . .

And constantly,
Day and night,
The students message, ask, demand,
And need.
And I am just trying to get through every day . . .

My – PART-TIME – job
(Which takes up 8 hours of every day) . . .
A never-ending litany of 'I don't understand'.

Framing (And Re-Framing): Choosing, Cutting, Shaping, Re-Fin(d)ing

We met and read through the poems that we had generated, and each highlighted and extracted the words, phrases, and ideas that we felt were the most significant for both of us, as we tried to find creative expression for our shared experiences. Each of us made a list of these words and phrases, and we then read through them, highlighting those that we had in common. This process conforms to Samaras' notion of framing (Samaras, 2011, p. 72). From these lists, we constructed a new composite poem that encompassed the key ideas and themes that had emerged from our writing and thinking process allowing the poem to emerge organically from our dialogic, polyvocal process of re-framing.

We printed out our list of phrases, words, and ideas, cut them out, and arranged and re-arranged them manually across a table, working together and finding our way towards the poem's final form. Once we were agreed on the arrangement we had made, we glued the strips of paper in place, and typed up the final poem, below, making minor edits as we did so.

There's No Learning Happening Here

A blank screen inside and out,
No idea how to reach them.
Only waiting:
To connect
To create
To be enough.
How to do this bravely?
How to breathe?
How to make a leap of faith?
Do more for them.
A tsunami of student need.
I don't know how to care enough for each student!

Floating freely,
Looking for anchors,
Nothing to go on.
Don't ask, don't tell, don't know.
Pretending to know, but not knowing.
What language should I speak
To cross the language barrier?
Their lives and mine float in parallel lines
Distant in space, time and knowing.
I don't understand why they are so unwilling to meet me.

I am doing my best!
The real teaching shifted
To teachers with the least say and the least power:
Make half-baked ideas work.
I will scream:
I always do my best!

They need something.
I need to step back.
Nothing I could possibly do would ever be enough.
How can anyone think that real learning is taking place?
A never-ending litany of I don't understand.

We then allowed ourselves some time alone to think about the poem, before we each wrote a paragraph in which we responded to the poem, using our key research question as a guide. When we met again, we discussed these responses and used them as the starting point for our dialogic analysis of the poem, and the development of a theoretical understanding.

Revisiting: Collaborative Meaning-Making Through Dialogue

As always, we have worked towards understanding through the collaborative meaning-making of dialogue, an intrinsic part of our creative and research practice (Meskin & Van der Walt, 2014) and our critical friendship (Van der Walt & Meskin, 2020). Dialogue is also at the centre of our theoretical engagement with the material emerging from our poetry, represented in dialogic form to capture the give and take of our discussion.

Working in this dialogic space enabled us to capture the vulnerability of our feelings, fears, and doubts (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015), while re-imagining a way forward. The poetic form and the subsequent dialogue make visible the empathy that underpins our collaborative relationship and friendship. This echoes Wegerif's (2015) description of thinking as 'seeing as if through the perspective of another' (p. 437). The practice of intimate scholarship and its dialogic nature enable us to 'realize [our] vulnerability and subjectivity in the research – occupying space as researcher and researched' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015, p. 156), allowing us to occupy the liminal space of possibilities between the two. In this dialogic manner, we have felt our way through our analysis of the poem, building a shared understanding of what the poem says about, for, and to us.

Tanya: The poem seems to me to encapsulate the complicated, messy nature of our feelings and our sense of ourselves as educators at the moment.

Tamar: It is definitely the messiness of it all – and the constant feeling of *swimming upstream* – a kind of inevitable futility about it all that is both unsettling and profoundly disempowering. If our function is to be educators, in a situation where we do not feel the experience of education happening, where does that leave us? Everything we once felt was secure and certain has become contingent and fluid.

Tanya: The first stanza for me is about the terrible feeling of disconnect that we both have, from our students, our colleagues, each other, and ourselves. Life and work under Covid conditions ask us to go way beyond our comfort zone and find new ways of doing the very things that are absolutely central to who we are as teachers. How to teach a practical, communicative, embodied discipline, while not being able to actually be with our students, is a daily challenge that we are all attempting to solve, but the poem reflects our feelings of vulnerability.

Tamar: The lines reflect an absence of agency, which is unsettling and frightening, especially for creative artists and educators. The image of the blank screen encapsulates the impersonality of the experience, the lack of human connections, the absence of contact, the impossibility of reading or understanding a response. Meanings become ever more contingent, and the fluidity of it all creates an overwhelming sensation of being adrift, untethered from the constants that have framed our professional practice for more than 20 years. It is a feeling of intense vulnerability in a space with no structures or systems to form a net to catch us as we fall – like the trapeze artist flying with sweaty hands, knowing they are not going to be caught, but too far into the swing to stop.

It is hard to be brave and resilient in such circumstances that demand ever more from us with ever fewer resources, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We have gone far beyond a relationship of teachers and learners; the relationship is now one of continuous amorphous need, making it hard to embrace the duty of care for our students and ourselves, before anything else.

Tanya: Yes, this connects to the feeling of being overwhelmed by the students' constant need. Most of our students are impoverished, socio-economically and educationally, and therefore often do not have resources and knowledge to manage online learning effectively, despite university management's perceptions to the contrary. So, the teaching staff become the focus of students' frustrations, fears, and challenges. Most of us face a constant barrage of messages and emails from students, all asking for help, explanation, clarification, and more.

Tamar: This is fundamental to my feeling of unsettlement. We are caught between the desire and need to help, our duty of care, and the necessity to self-protect. The image of the tsunami captures the sense of impending doom that accompanies every Zoom class, or online forum. On average, one-tenth of the class participates in a Zoom session – so even when one is doing it, one is aware of its futility, because more than two-thirds of the class is not present.

I feel deeply the duty of care – and believe that it is fundamentally the experience of empathetic connection that makes drama such a powerful learning medium. But how to care enough – when the need is insatiable? And how to do it without losing oneself? Surely the duty of care is not only to our students, but also to ourselves, and each other?

Tanya: The second stanza reflects how we are *learning on our feet* to teach in a completely new and untested way. This really relates to the fluidity and contingency you mentioned. Since March 2020, everything we have done has felt like a wild experiment – we are unable to rely on our tried and tested methods and ideas, but we still have to find a way to teach similar material, and build practical skills in our students. This constant feeling of *winging it* is unsettling, leaving us feeling untethered and often lost. The assumption is that it is easy to simply shift your teaching to an online mode, but it is anything but. We are trying to learn how to do this, while we are doing it, and there is huge pressure from management and students for us to succeed, but with little or no support.

Tamar: As theatre people, we know how to improvise, but ordinarily, we improvise around a thematic centre. Here, we are improvising the teaching methods and the revised content, the new modes of assessment, and the practical logistics. Ordinarily, experiential

learning works, but here the experiences are so disconnected, so solitary, that the experience itself lacks definition. We have to learn new forms of resilience to survive the ever-changing dynamics – and new skills!

Tanya: This stanza also touches on the difficulties of remotely teaching students whose home language is different to ours. The online teaching space makes clear communication so much harder when we cannot use non-verbal cues, body language, demonstration, and other *live* elements to help students understand the words we say.

Tamar: It is certainly in language that the disconnect manifests itself most strongly. For me, the *language* is not just the actual language barrier, but also the barrier in the language of connecting that used to guide my teaching practice, the trust that used to sit at the centre of the teaching and learning dynamic. Before, we were building communities of practice in learning environments, but here I feel that we have no shared experience as a basis for the community to be built.

The measures and markers for success have inexorably altered; there are no signifiers for having connected to the ideas in the absence of contact and response. Most of the learning is done independently – so we place recorded lectures online, and trust (hope) that students will listen to them. But even if they do, the likelihood is that necessary meaning will be lost in the act of translation – literally and figuratively. Without the opportunity to read the cues that signify understanding, one is reduced to vaguely hoping that something will seep through.

Tanya: We are also made acutely aware of the vastly different socio-economic positions that our students occupy, and how these also differ from our own. The online learning environment throws these into even more sharp relief than in-person teaching does.

Tamar: This is perhaps the most painful aspect of the whole process. Covid has magnified inequalities to such a degree that it is hard to function within that awareness. We are expected to maintain standards, but we are acutely aware of the dire situations in which many of our students find themselves. Just as we are disconnected, so are they. How does one demand excellence in class when one knows the student is living in a rural area with no electricity, being subject to abuse at home, or facing bereavement after bereavement as the pandemic rages across our communities? Somehow the lack of human interaction makes any kind of mitigation impossible. It's a gaping chasm of difference across which I can find no bridge.

Tanya: The third stanza is about the pressure being placed upon us as teachers, particularly, for me, in the small-group teaching. The shifting of the real, intimate engagement with the students to the small-group tutorials, mostly taught by adjunct staff members or postgraduate students, means that the people teaching do not have much say in designing the courses, tasks, and assessments (many of which are experimental at best). But they are still expected to be *on the frontline* of dealing with the students daily.

Tamar: This is also part of the problem. Struggling ourselves, as permanent staff members, we ask tutors (many of whom are largely untrained and inexperienced) to bear the burden of the detail. Developing an online curriculum over about a month with little to no experience therein, has resulted in a teaching of genericism; we sketch the broad strokes, and then ask our tutors to flesh them out. But often, the fleshing out is insufficiently

planned, and does not consider the reality of circumstance. The careful planning of what, how, and why of the learning is glossed over. And the consequence is felt by those who really have no authority to change anything.

Tanya: The last stanza returns to the all-encompassing sense that the students need more than we can ever give. Our students are lonely, disempowered, overwhelmed, and in many cases, barely coping. We feel the same. The expectation is that we can give unendingly to support student learning, but we are acutely aware that our mental and physical health is suffering. Through online teaching, and the fact that we are now in contact with students 24 hours a day through our mobile phones, our working life and our home/personal lives have begun to blur into each other in ways that are not always healthy.

Tamar: It leaves us stretched to the point of breaking, thin-skinned, tetchy, angry, disappointed. My breaking point feels like it is imminent every day. How can any teaching occur when one feels this way, let alone any learning?

Tanya: The last two lines of the poem really sum up our overriding feelings about ourselves as teachers at this time. We agree that there is little real, engaged, deep learning happening. It is almost impossible to teach live performance over a Zoom call or a WhatsApp voice note. The never-ending cry of the students that they don't understand is completely appropriate – the truth is, neither do we!

Tamar: Thinking about all of this reminds me that we must actively seek strategies to help us find new pathways, to learn to teach all over again in this strange new twilight zone. We need to see the lack of knowing as an opportunity for invention and responsiveness.

Tanya: And despite the sense of negativity that seems to pervade the poem, I do think there are positives that we have found in this experience. We have both experienced exponential growth in our understanding and use of digital learning tools, in a way that has pushed us out of our comfort zone.

Tamar: The challenge of reinventing our course content has also allowed our imagination and creativity to flourish as we have used every tool in our arsenal to set up creative, engaged, embodied learning experiences, albeit in a disembodied context.

Tanya: For me, the collaborative nature of the tutor groups has provided a space for sharing of knowledge and support between the adjunct staff and postgraduate students. This is evidence of the power of the collaborative mindset. In our tutors' WhatsApp groups, we have asked questions, sought advice, cried, laughed, and shared insights, in an affirming collective space. This has allowed us all to feel less isolated, as these lines of communication allowed us to connect with and care for each other.

Tamar: And, after almost two years of doing this, we teachers and our students are all getting better at online teaching and learning, as we become more and more accustomed to the new world.

Moving from Dialogue to Understanding

The dialogue above shows how the difficult feelings associated with this experience, concerning our teaching, and the unsettledness resulting from living through the pandemic, heightened our vulnerability and anxiety, and challenged our habitual ways of working. Poetic inquiry offered an alternative approach, creating a 'conduit of creativity' (Gulla, 2014, p. 143) through which we could 'channel [our] vulnerability' (p. 143). Indeed, the act of making the poetry becomes performative, as Prendergast (2009) argues, 'revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research' (p. 547).

The performative quality attached to the crafting and recrafting of our poems enhanced their meaning-making capacity when seen against our inability to make theatre during the height of the pandemic. This was evidenced in the joy we felt as we physically cut up our poetic data and pasted it together on a new page as it took new form; the physicality of the act allowed us to reconnect to our sense of joy in *making* something creative again. The making of poems allowed us to realize that we had not forgotten how to be creative beings, and re-awakened something that had felt lost or dormant since the beginning of the pandemic.

Similarly, the opportunity to work collaboratively and playfully again – feeding off each other's energies in a dynamic experiential present – created an opening for re-discovering the play-filled relationship that is such a crucial aspect of our working together. The poetic inquiry served as the vehicle for creating our data and as the means for processing through that data to renew the creative teacherly spirit. The making of the poems – as opposed to the finished poetic artifacts – is thus part of the journey and navigating of our current situation, helping us understand our place and sense of ourselves within this moment of rupture.

We also use the poetic form for the *process* of analysis, not just as the artifact *for* analysis. In this way, we engage with Richardson's (2000) conception of writing as 'a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis.' (p. 923). Each revisioning of the pieces of poetry becomes a new artifact, which exists in the quasi-liminal space of being both data and analysis simultaneously. Our writing and re-writing of our poems enabled us to 'see, feel, and analyze the familiar in new ways, inviting us to reflect on the circumstances of others and ourselves in ways that tolerate ambiguity, celebrate process and openness, and avoid premature closure' (Sparkes et al., 2003, p. 169).

Central to this process is our attempt to grapple with the unravelling of our sense of self as educators. Given the complexities of the challenges we face, poetry offered a perfect form to explore our unsettled and unsettling states of mind compactly and directly and made visible by the neatness of the form. Even though the feelings and the process of making the poetry were messy, non-linear, and recursive, the actual poems themselves, once constructed, became self-contained artifacts that we analyzed and critiqued in a way that our feelings could not be. The act of making the poems allowed us to create a sense of critical distance, and process, come to know, and understand our feelings, while not being mired in them.

Moving from Understanding to Knowing

So, what have we learned through poetic inquiry about negotiating our identity as educators in a creative discipline during the pandemic? The process has been cathartic, allowing us to voice our hitherto unspoken and inchoate emotions and ideas. This is both healing and constructive, offering glimpses of how we might build resilience for ourselves and each other in the absence of familiar anchors. The making of the poems as a creative, experimental, and dialogic process has re-inspired, re-awakened, and re-invigorated us. By reminding ourselves of the transformative power of collaboration and creativity, both in our work and in our lives, we have been reminded of what makes us artists and educators.

This does not mean that online teaching will suddenly become easy or without challenges. However, we believe we have come to an understanding of the qualities we need to nurture that might enable us to survive and even, perhaps, thrive. We are acutely aware of the serious challenges posed by socio-economic inequalities in South Africa, the eroding of boundaries between work and our personal and home lives, as well as the problems created when an institutional culture does not adequately support staff. These are complex, structural problems that we do not have the space to address adequately here. Instead, in allowing ourselves to voice our feelings through poetry, conducting this self-study has allowed us to envision a way forward for our selves. In so doing, we have recognized how an acceptance of fluidity and contingency will allow us to navigate the rapid changes that continue to challenge us. By embracing an ethic of care for ourselves, each other, and our students, we can create a support system to counteract the feelings of loneliness and isolation that have become so overwhelming. Our acceptance of vulnerability, and the openness with which we have shared our complicated feelings, has allowed us to recognize that not everything about our circumstances is bad. By being adaptable and trusting our resilience, we begin to find the positives, slowly imagine a different way of being teachers, and seek to embrace, rather than resist, the challenges we face.

Implications for Our Selves, and Others

We see our poetic inquiry self-study as offering an exemplar (Mishler, 1990) of practice, in which the dialogic nature of the study lends validity and reliability. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2015) note that 'When we engage in dialogue as a process of coming-to-know it results in understandings that are trustworthy . . . [since] dialogue lends authority and strength to understandings about the focus of our study as intimate scholars' (p. 157). Thus, while our study is specific to our identities and circumstances, like all self-study, it offers insights into the broader questions of how to navigate profound challenges to one's sense of self.

Through this experience, we have come to understand that

> Enhanced awareness of the shifting nature of our selves and our knowing can heighten our consciousness that some change for the better is almost always within reach. When hope and optimism are supported by experiential wisdom gained through shared creative engagement, we can confidently make a qualitative difference in our work. (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016, p. 455)

This resonates with the nature of self-study as an 'optimistic endeavour' (Pithouse-Morgan, 2016, p. 12), which is premised on the notion that 'change is possible' (p. 12). The trustworthiness of our study rests not least in the change to our sense of self that the process has facilitated.

The reciprocal, collaborative, dialogic exploration in our poetic inquiry offers a methodological approach that others may find useful in developing their poetic self-study research. Our approach also allowed us to extend the role of critical friendship in poetic inquiry, to include the reciprocal, dialogic nature of our process.

This poetic self-study inquiry has enabled us to reconstitute our thought community (John-Steiner, 2000); reconnecting us to ourselves and to each other has helped mitigate the sense of dissonance in our lived reality. Grappling with our crisis of educator-artist identity has offered a space in which to come to terms with it, allowing us to move forward, reminding ourselves of our capacity

To connect

To create

To be enough

Such a memory anchors us, ensuring that there may always be learning happening here.

Disclosure Statement

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