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Perspectives in Education

Special Issue
Self-study of educational practice: Re-imagining our pedagogies

guest edited by
Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, Claudia Mitchell & Daisy Pillay

Complex journeys and methodological responses to engaging in self-study in a rural comprehensive university

Thenjiwe Meyiwa, Theresa Chisanga, Paul Mokhele, Nkosinathi Sotshangane & Sizakele Makhanya

The context in which self-study research is conducted is sometimes complex, affecting the manner in which related data is gathered and interpreted. This article comprises collaboration between three students and two supervisors. It shares methodological choices made by graduate students and supervisors of a rural university at which, self-study research was introduced in 2010. As individuals, and as a collective, we reflect on the reasons and decisions for adopting certain research approaches towards self-study: the ways in which such decisions are negotiated in conceptualising, conducting, transcribing, and supervising graduate research. While self-reflexive data-collection approaches (mainly journal writing and storytelling) guide our research, the manner in which data is analysed and presented to the wider university community is influenced by expectations and by the context of the university. We, therefore, use innovative approaches differing from self-study research, speaking more to the challenges and expectations of a rural context. We further reflect on the implications such choices have for our research and the work produced – where knowledge shifts are executed, methodologies are re-defined and social change is desired.

Keywords: Rural university, self-study, social transformation, reflexive ubuntu

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Introduction: Collective alongside individual reflections, processes at crossroads

Scholars have documented and theorised the reciprocity between self-study research and forms of knowing, knowledge being used to generate social transformation (LaBoskey, 2004; Kirk, 2005; Samaras, 2011; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012). Following Mitchell's (2011) bold claim that sensitive researchers reflect on reasons for conducting research intending to respond to concerns of the broader society, we examine reasons and decisions for adopting certain research approaches, using a self-study practitioner inquiry. Research being about generating data, we investigate such knowledge production within the context of our university, a rural comprehensive institution whose campuses and authors of this article are widely dispersed. Throughout the article, we use the third-person form of reporting, presenting our reflections *verbatim*. We embark on the task of 'producing' this article, reflecting first as individuals, and later as a collective. We briefly explain processes leading to the writing up of this article, as a form of data generation of benefit to the self, to us as individuals, and to the broader social context of our university. Following Erikson's (1964; 1982) as well as McAdams and de St. Aubin's (1992) notion of generativity, we subscribe to the concept that the performance of generativity, i.e. the act of producing, is not only limited to the domain of parenting. At our university, we form part of a group of people who "may be expressed as having given birth to and raised children ... in that, as parents, [we] are actively involved in providing for the next generation" (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992: 1003).

We, the authors, include two supervisors and three graduate staff-students. Our research subject fields range from language and literature to ethics, education technology, clothing technology, and gender studies. Three authors are lecturers, while the other two are solely involved in research and research-capacity development. The common thread for us is the use of self-study research approaches encompassing and allowing the various interpretations. This has helped us better clarify the essence of self-study within ourselves as a group, and to outside colleagues. Although completing this exercise was not easy, given our diverse views, the varied understandings of self-study led to vigorous debates proving acts of data-generation, enhancing our role of 'providing for the next generation'. Such a debate, for example, once took place via email. Having just written up his doctoral thesis, Paul declared suddenly to the two supervisors that researchers should not place undue emphasis on differences between self-study and action research. This demonstrates that the student had learnt the value of critical engagement, a skill taught in self-study research approaches (i.e., confidently and honestly expressing personal views). Such debates and sharing of the self-study experience in the Transformative Education/al Studies (TES)¹ project forms the bulk of the data mostly embedded into this discussion and into the article. We also chronicled the shared experiences of supervision in writing and recording them; we held face-to-face meetings as well as virtual meetings. These

were refreshing experiences, if sometimes challenging. Data includes our encounters, what we have learned together, and the transformation provided by the experiences. We tread a fine line between the 'self' as individuals and the 'self' as a group, the former contributing greatly to the construction of the group experience. In the next section, we briefly interrogate reflexivity and its significance and impact on our study.

Collective reflexive action

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2005: 35), reflexivity is the process of stepping back from an experience, processing its meaning in order to plan further action. We believe that conducting this type of research in a rural university has provided an opportunity to extend one's development, pointing meaningfully to the development of our context and our on-the-job practice. Our context, the university, and some staff members, in particular, have benefited from: "my realization that, since embarking on self-study research I have consciously become more caring, and I am more motivated to develop others. I now conduct self-evaluation sessions after each workshop", as shared by Nkosinathi, who develops applied research skills in university personnel.

The process of writing this article included reflecting on the meaning of assessing ourselves as individuals, following our work in the classroom and elsewhere. Demonstrating such reflexive research engagements can contribute towards developing self-study research. When this practice is consciously understood as a means of generating the epistemological base, opportunities for an enhanced transformation of an active research culture at our university will be more readily enabled. Whitehead (1989) holds that it is through self-evaluation that an enhanced research culture can emerge. Quality of research could be improved, leading, in turn, legitimately to research capacity development, an approach speaking distinctly to the self, forcing intense and emotional episodes of change way beyond the self.

The context of our research and learning

African rural communities tend to espouse communality, discouraging individualism. While self-study is not an egotistical, self-centred approach, the terminology, focusing on the 'I', not 'we', has posed challenges for a community championing communality. Patience is required in explaining self-study as a conscious effort to begin with oneself in making a difference. It aims at purposefully fostering social change, through research centrally positioning the individual, by employing measures such as reflexivity and journal writing, later shared by the group.

We joined the TES project at various stages between 2010 and 2011 at a rural university for the so-called 'historically disadvantaged'. Our university embraces communality, loosely defined as significant communal networks, where projects are conducted collectively, with little or no focus on individuals. Self-reflexivity and forms of transformation appear in the rural context, prioritising communal activity,

shunning the word 'self'. Thenjiwe, who introduced self-study to the university, states that,

as a research concept, self-study was new to me, but as part of a research reflective exercise, having been a feminist researcher for some time, it was an approach to which I could easily relate. This provided some comfort in that there was bound to be some resonance between these fields of study, from a conceptual to a methodological point of view?

With the university espousing communality over self, it was crucial to present the field of study in an acceptable way. The emphasis on 'self' in self-study was to be reduced, emphasising instead the research approach, embracing reflecting and improving teaching, learning, and research – the latter being the university's main concern. We had to consciously 'dress-up' self-study, while 'watering down' our methodological approach. Concerned about local context, Paul had to "pretend to be confining my methodology to a case study, and not living-theory methodology", which emphasises the 'self'.

The context of the supervision engagement is a South African rural and disadvantaged university within a former Bantustan, a 'homeland' set up by the apartheid government. In 2005, a former traditional university and two former technikons merged to form this comprehensive university, offering university and technikon qualifications. The province in which our university is based ranks among the poorest, and the university among the least-resourced in the country. The majority of both undergraduate and postgraduate students are from the same catchment area; they would have attended the same poorly resourced rural schools. They, therefore, enter the university mostly under-equipped for higher education; especially since the official language of teaching and learning is English – at best a second language and at worst a foreign language, for the majority of university students in this area.

For this reason, our collective experience as supervisors and graduate students before joining TES was often unhappy. Many university supervisors complain that graduate marks averaging below 60% are accepted in order to admit sufficient students. Many students admitted to the postgraduate programme find the programme difficult as they do not meet the national minimum requirements. They often drop out of the programme because of the research component, which requires conducting empirical research and writing up the dissertation to the required standard. This proves to be a bottleneck and frustrating to both supervisors and students. Reflecting on her journey as a supervisor, Theresa observes:

one of the problems of traditional supervision for both supervisor and student, is that the supervisor is assumed to be the all-knowing "container" of knowledge which he/she then has the responsibility of "pouring" out into the more or less "empty vessel" in the form of the student. I had been brought up in this tradition and it was always an extra challenge with students who even at this level were not independent; it was easy to ignore the situation, as you could always blame it on the students or on the under-resourced system.

An impoverished set-up providing few resources encourages neither the supervisor nor the student to make hasty progress, too often abruptly ending the studies when students leave, and admitting defeat. Teachers may easily become set in a mould, excluding freedom of innovation and creativity. The assumption of the 'empty vessel' strains both parties, the student appearing to believe that s/he has nothing to contribute, coming to lectures and consultations not having read or prepared anything, ready simply to 'receive' the knowledge. The supervisor, however, insists on rigid 'standard procedures'. This discourages the student from digging into his/her inner depths, thus offering embodied knowledge, letting this blend with the new, in creating new synergies, resulting in new understanding and possibly new knowledge.

Upon joining the TES classroom as novice supervisors and students, we formed a cohort of 'students' of self-study research methodologies, finding ourselves in a learning laboratory. Several workshops in self-study with colleagues from sister universities introduced us to self-study, as well as to aspects of action research. Interacting with more experienced supervisors of self-study research and joining in collaborative academic activities, we clearly required a new attitude and approach to the entire supervision process from within. Notwithstanding the conditions of our university, we have embraced lessons learnt from our context which, coupled with the TES classroom, make us appreciate all allowance for innovation and creativity. In turn, we draw from McAdams and de St. Aubin's (1992: 1010) position that generativity is bred from

cultural demand...; inner desire...; concern for the care and development of the next generation; a belief in the goodness and worthiness of the human species...; and the personal narration of generativity as a key feature of an adult's evolving and self-defining life story.

We concur with this sentiment, each author acknowledging a transformation, indicated by the following brief extracts: "With self-study, I have had to learn patience with my students and acceptance of myself as a student of this discipline, open to the two-way processes of supervising and learning from them ..." (Theresa); "As a beginner self-study supervisor I learnt to be open with my students and express the fact that I am just a novice as they are. It has been a humbling experience" (Thenjiwe).

Collective transformation and methodological complexities

We contend that the reason for experiencing a change in our outlook through our affiliation with TES is a transformation intensified by the nature of self-study research. Initially, the challenge was a lack of understanding of a complete account of all aspects of self-study as a methodological research approach. Later, we began interpreting self-study as an approach that, while speaking distinctly to the self, forces intense and emotional episodes of change, demanding that researchers creatively engage with their contexts. This has compelled us to appreciate McAdams and de St. Aubin's (1992: 1003) account of the need for researchers to "make a commitment to the larger sphere of society as a whole and its continuation, even improvement".

Recollecting episodes of change, Thenjiwe declares that, with the TES project, she regarded herself as a novice self-study researcher. She also had to remain a learner-supervisor, despite having supervised graduate students in other disciplines for nearly two decades, as she "had to learn new ways of providing guidance to graduate students, while at the same time learning new related methodological approaches".

Academics may become hidebound, often operating within the confines and expectations of their subject fields when conducting research (Schell & Black, 1997; Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey & Russell, 2004). For us, the challenge was greater: while new to self-study, we had to be advocates of a kind of research outside the subject field of most colleagues. We had to present self-study in a manner that 'sounded most convincing' to colleagues, and to which they could easily relate; hence, the methodological approach of storytelling was devised, familiar concepts being used to explain characteristics of self-study.

We discovered that, notwithstanding the university and its daunting contextual challenges, an alternative way of dealing with such challenges is introspection (Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012), intending to find creative solutions working first for an individual towards which a collective can contribute. With this conceptual underpinning, we withstood the most common challenge encountered at seminar presentations – people questioning the use of the personal pronouns 'I' and/or 'we' instead of the description 'researcher'. We realise that formulating our research using storytelling allows readers, though with less intensity, to relate to self-study research. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007, cited in Clandinin, 2013: 11) observe that "lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities".

Indeed, Lawrence and Moyo (2006) and Lawrence and Zinn (2007), in their work on transforming education in the Eastern Cape, clearly demonstrate this with the stories of their co-workers and teachers. Paul, finding the term 'researcher' unassuming and too neutral, mentions that he grew to

interpret it as a term with limitations to my study, which is a documentation of changes in "me" as an individual, and also how my teaching and learning procedures have changed, and how that change has affected my students, hence writing in the first-person active voice makes sense to me.

Choices made: Innovation adopted in our research

While we were all attracted to self-study, which would improve our research, teaching, and learning, it has skilled us in the varied forms of data-collecting and interpreting of research data. Initially, the methodology used by the majority of researchers was the writing up of reflections, using journals and portfolios. Later, within portfolios, rural-related stories were incorporated in concretising and better contextualising the stories with appropriate metaphors and symbolism. Emphasising the importance of

using methods requiring the researcher to be creative, Samaras and Freese (2009: 9) advocate the use of a "self-study method which incorporates other methods, such as personal history, narrative inquiry, reflective portfolios, memory work, or arts-based methods". Sizakele credits these authors with her preference for using visual methodology in her work, explaining: "I use photos to capture incidents when teaching and learning, which allow for creativity in my research". Nkosinathi, however, states that, "in order for me to choose an appropriate methodology, it becomes essential to start by asking the following important questions: (1) will the methodology that I choose assist effective change, and (2) are data interpretations adequately assured by the methodology?"

For LaBoskey (2004), the methodology is important: it must align with what is being asked. Many scholars (Sherman & Webb, 1990; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992; Manke, 2004; Whitehead, 2010), therefore, assert that research methodology should emerge alongside the practitioner's practice, urging him/her to reflect and act, addressing needs of the given practice. Coupled with the use of multiple-data sources and methodologies, self-study inquiry allows individuals to study themselves in their practice as well as in their belief systems, assumptions, and environment. This approach suits a rural context, linked to the researcher being required to locate research conducted within a changing understanding of the historical, social, economic and political contexts (Zuber-Skerrit, 1992).

The self-study of research practice compels practitioners to be relevant and to align their research with the realities of their environment, thereby being creative, thinking 'outside the box'. Its practitioners and researchers are always eager to better understand self-study, including its value for education. Zeichner (1999: 8) observes that "the birth of the self-study in the teacher-education movement of the 1990s was probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher-education research"; this champions innovation and knowledge creation.

Knowledge generated from our differing experiences at our university and gleaned from our research contributes to the professional development and improvement of our practices as teachers, researchers and supervisors. We are confident that our varied and improved practices will add to the knowledge base by enhancing the quality of learning, when sharing these experiences with others, whether or not they subscribe to self-study.

Whitehead (2011) comments on the experiences of teachers in the UK who were recently subjected to oppressive statutory regulations unsupportive of their creativity in improving their practices. He promotes the need for flexibility and the accommodation of creativity in research.

Having had the privilege of attending many TES workshops, we have been exposed to various practical ways of conducting research, such as the use of poetic inquiry, artefacts, journal writing, the use of audio and video records as evidence, and so

on. Relational issues between supervisors and students can themselves be defining factors in the success or failure of one's practice. Whitehead (1993) contends that a great deal is lost in capturing what really works in the teaching and learning process, because the 'magic' of the participant interactions cannot always be articulated, being appropriately recorded as evidence of contribution to educational knowledge, because, traditionally, this is not part of the practice. He adds that the total experience of a teaching and learning session should be considered legitimate, part of the 'living theory of educational practice' in the world of academia. From interactions with colleagues within and outside the TES project, we have learnt that there are as many correct ways of conducting self-study research as there are workable possibilities, if one keeps an open mind, releasing the options. There are many ways of presenting research findings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Lastly, ways of achieving a generative point, where both "establishment and guidance of the next generation" (MacAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992: 1011) may be understood and seen to be "successfully" taking place, have been experienced as refreshing in the TES projects and the TES meetings within our university, resulting in collaborative research activities and an open sharing of information. We are also more relaxed with the idea and use of the concept of 'critical friends', all parties' ideas being valued and critically engaged with. TES workshops have also taught us practical ways of demonstrating, for example, that there is always more than one view to a story or an event, using poetry, visual arts, and self-reflection, even as one thinks about an image or one's own understanding of a 'critical friend'. These methodologies all demonstrate that, if we give back the power to the student/mentees by recognising them as knowledge generators, sharing the learning process, a great deal more may be achieved. The process may become a two-way journey of discovery.

The TES project has provided alternative ways of supervision, assuming a challenging position, minutely examining one's ways of conducting research and of relating to others. Self-study empowers, because it recognises that no one comes to learning as an empty slate. The embodied knowledge of one's origin and background (culture, language, religion, and so on) is important and relevant in every situation, thus contributing to one's overall being, one's attitude, one's world view and the way in which one deals with other people (Samaras & Freese, 2006; 2009). All relate to teaching and learning.

Reasons and decisions for adopting specific methodological approaches

While our chosen research methodologies at best relate to the university and its rural context, we as a group have discovered that discussing self-study and having to convince our colleagues of its value takes its toll on us. The knowledge that

we are not alone is encouraging; other TES project team members could be in a similar position; they become our support system. Having experienced rejection and resistance at times, we have had to 'dress-up' self-study as a kind of action research which, although well-known, is not fully accepted at the university.

The self-study conceptual approach we most favour relates to the living theory, which emphasises the importance of examining whether one is living up to the best of one's values, in conducting research and in on-the-job practice (Whitehead, 1993). Prioritising this approach has helped transfer these values to our teaching and learning. We adopt Samaras and Freese's (2006) notion that their method, while it traces their personal histories, narrative inquiry, reflective portfolios, memory work, and so on, requires a confrontation with their personal values. We are persuaded by Kurt Lewin (1951), who stresses that people do change, subsequently taking action in order to realise that change when they experience the need for change, adopting new behaviours (new action) based on their values.

Some of our choices, for example, closely aligning self-study with action research, have had negative effects. Some colleagues insist on adhering to action research (that which they have read about, know and/or find acceptable as a research approach). Arguments advanced include that numerous self-study scholars came to self-study research from action research. This dilutes the efforts of advancing the 'self-study movement'. However, there is an appreciation and acknowledgement that self-study, although related to action research, has distinguishing differences and distinctive methodological components. Insistence on advocating that in both self-study and action research the researcher investigates problems related to one's practice so as to improve one's work, though ingenious, indicates that some self-study colleagues fear change, the very concept and behaviour they profess to promulgate. Being true to self-study to the best of one's ability is crucial; we believe that self-study researchers should be "true" to themselves by keeping their studies "real", be it "negatively or positively" (Masinga, 2012: 129). The purpose of this article is, therefore, more an offer of professional renewal.

Implications of choices made in our research and broadly self-study scholarship

In this section, we reflect on how we have revisited our practice and research, influenced by self-study scholarship. Evidently, decisions taken have greatly affected the conducting of our research, the supervision of our students, and the suggestions they ultimately choose to perform. Although paralleling self-study with action research has created some confusion, it has equally provided an opportunity for exploring adapted approaches of conducting self-study. Our research journeys have certainly contributed to generating information, partially serving to introduce the self-study subject field at our university. We regard this as a step towards harnessing

the broader values of TES as a multi-institutional and multidisciplinary project, in bringing about positive change. We are determined imminently to produce exemplary self-study master projects associated with TES, thereby demonstrating the value of self-study. This achievement must be realised and broadcasted.

Since we joined TES, some transformation has been 'imposed' on us all, first as individual researchers, as well as co-researchers and/or co-supervisors of self-study graduate research. We, therefore, appreciate that differing points of view enhance knowledge fields, with researchers not being set on a particular research approach.

While we treasure the TES project as connecting us at our university and beyond, we have wondered about the ultimate outcome of our approach to self-study research, the objectives of the TES project, and our responsibilities and expectations at our university. We also know that, since the inception of TES and our introduction to self-study, our main areas of research and scholarship, our collective experiences, and future research will always be affected by this exposure. Whatever practical implications exist for our university may be learnt from the said challenges and the manner in which we have attempted to overcome these challenges. Transformation is evidenced in our engagement with our students and mentees and in the regard now held for their prior knowledge. TES values influence us in drawing from our embodied knowledge, encouraging our students to do likewise at the start of research and teaching practices. Theresa and Thenjiwe both accede that, since joining TES, such an approach has formed the backbone transforming students' teaching, supervision, and conducting of their research, crucial for a rural disadvantaged institution. Mentees are now re-imagined as 'knowers and carriers' of types of knowledge vital for their own learning. Their diverse experiences provide a great deal of information, all of which is brought to the teaching and learning experience, significantly affecting the work produced such as written essays, analyses and theses. Sizakele, with a Master's degree in self-study and currently enrolled for a subsequent doctoral degree, mentions that engaging and fully embracing self-study has been the best tool in improving issues encountered in her professional and personal life. She has learned the importance of reflection, using it for both her professional practice and her everyday life. She concludes:

since embracing self-study I do things differently; my graduate studies have led to improved personal writing skills, strategies of improving my students' writing skills and appreciation that it is with constant honest reflection that this has come about. I now understand my practice as a teacher of students from disadvantaged backgrounds differently.

It is also true that the self-study genre employs a broad range of qualitative methods (Graig, 2009), including action research and narrative inquiry; leaning on narrative-enquiry logic is preferred. According to Czarniawska (2004, cited in Whitehead, 2009: 2), narrative enquiry is a specific type of qualitative design in which "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected". With this method, some research

shows the ability to 'tell' our actions and data-gathering, generating these through lived experiences as they emerge sporadically. Paul, a recent self-study doctoral graduate, tapped into what was familiar with his students, including the use of family and life stories, encouraging participation in his study, which examined strategies for improving his teaching skills, incorporating the investigation of students' learning and study skills. The narrative inquiry research approach introduced self-study to the students; its nature of researching 'with' others and not 'on' them was found to be aligned with the concept of *ubuntu* to which his students were accustomed. Nkosinathi claimed that his earlier fears of possible effects of "exposing myself to the danger of being judged by my students and making a mockery of myself" were thus minimised. In narrative inquiry, constant reflection produces benefits beyond TES-related research activities; however, as Theresa and Sizakele share below, this practice encourages 'unlearning' former traditional ways of engaging with their students. Theresa notes:

asking myself an unending range of questions at every point of my teaching almost like looking at my soul and trying to understand why I do the things that I do and say the things that I say in my practice. The more whys I pose to myself, the deeper I get into my being and the more honest my views, the more sensitive to the other and the more refined my ideas seem to me.

This kind of awareness is shared by Sizakele's reference to a new practice in her teaching, requiring students to:

write reflections after each lesson involves them in a process of improving their own learning. Through the reflective exercises I have also learned how to observe ideas that emerge from my practice and from which I use my students' creativity to improve teaching and learning.

Transformation has created space, encouraging students to interrogate their university-related work while allowing them to talk freely about who they are, and how they feel about processes related to their own learning. Embodied in the above defined transformative classroom practices and attitudes is the "conceptual underpinning of reflexive *ubuntu*, which demands a consciousness of our developing 'selves' as researchers and supervisors and of our interrelationships with other people" (Harrison, Pithouse-Morgan, Conolly & Meyiwa, 2012: 12).

Transformation at our university should, therefore, not only be geared towards adding to the students' knowledge base, skills and potential, but also empower those students involved in higher education to develop the critical ability of becoming self-determined (Waghid, 2002: 459). Although the context in which our institution operates may potentially push us further away from doing work that is only "tangentially related to true self-study research" (Lassonde, 2009: xii), it is prudent to acknowledge that such generative modelling is necessary for the transformation process. Self-study should be a valuable contribution to the field of teacher education and skills' development. Samaras and Freese (2009: 8) state that "[s]elf-study research requires openness and vulnerability since the focus is on the self". We concur that conducting self-study research can initiate a painful but

exciting, life-affirming, academic journey. Paul alludes to this, saying: "It is not an easy thing to dig into my past; the past that made me think and do things the way I do them today".

An individual's achievement in his/her daily work, albeit on a small scale, does make a difference. Should colleagues embark on similar research – by striving to work with them, cultivating hope in the face of a challenged environment – we can certainly "make a real and important difference in terms of affecting the work and life of each self-study researcher and the broader environment within which the university is located" (Nkosinathi).

A major goal of self-study research of practice is for researchers to examine and gain knowledge of their context, while assessing and improving their environment, its impact on their learning, and that of their students and colleagues, thus contributing to the knowledge base of solving problems peculiar to the rural context. This important work, according to Samaras (2011: 21), may be accomplished with the support and critique of colleagues. At our rural university, some of us are teachers who regard the classroom as the laboratory for change; others, however, could be regarded as educational and research reformers, whose task is to contribute towards rebuilding the culture of research within the university.

According to Samaras (2011: 56), it is essential to continually question our own practice as people involved in the development of others. We have had to grapple with working together as critical friends among graduate students, and as supervisors, especially through collaborative self-study. This process has provided encouragement not only to examine our own responses, thus gaining a more empathetic and social understanding of our rural contexts, but also to be cognisant of the effect that these facets have on one another. We have embarked on these research practices influenced by Whitehead's (1989) Living Educational Theory (LET), which he defines as personal theory-making produced from practitioners' accounts of their learning and practice. Like research, teaching is based not on propositional theories, but on teachers' reconceptualisation of practice, and with practical implications. Owing to these practical implications, Pithouse-Morgan and Van Laren (2012: 416-427) state that "generativity", which implies creativity, is essentially a call to contribute to the well-being of others, particularly those who are 'novices' in their work and in life, as are young people. Indeed, for us, as researchers at a rural university, the idea of academic generativity is more wholly inspiring than academic productivity. Therefore, self-study begins with us as researchers initiating our exploration into possibilities for generativity or productivity in our educational research.

As a team of students and supervisors of self-study, we differ greatly, and thus have learnt a great deal from each of our supervision processes. Theresa states:

in some instances, I found myself gaining insights I had not thought of; and learning from the students. In other instances, I found that I had to dig deeper into my inner recesses and bring out not only the professional teacher in me

but also, at times, the Chaplain, in order to reach out and meet my students at their point of need.

Such sentiments relate more to listening to personal stories and challenges, not always directly related to the studies under investigation.

Concluding remarks

For many years, practitioners within varied fields have been conducting processes related to reflecting on their work, mainly in attempting to improve the results of their practice. In this article, we reflected on the value of self-study, discussing the manner in which this field of study has contributed towards bringing about personal and collective change to the authors. Teachers must ascertain whether their teaching approaches, philosophies, values, and beliefs assist or hinder students' learning. They must constantly ask themselves questions such as: In what way can I contribute towards removing barriers to my students' learning? We believe that encouraging teacher-educators and other practitioners seeking change demands that they ask themselves these questions. We maintain that self-study inquiry should be encouraged as a research-supported way of improving our teaching, while promoting profound and lasting learning, allowing it to contribute to one's own development, and that of others. This flexibility makes the scholarship appealing and applicable to a number of disciplines that superficially seem to be unrelated. As demonstrated earlier, students become active in their own learning, mentor-mentee and teacher-student interactions, thus significantly contributing towards shaping their work during their active production of knowledge. At most, they remain interested in their studies. Self-study inquiry is an essential tool for transformative education especially for research, teaching, and learning in a poor, rural, and under-resourced institution such as ours.

Endnotes

1. We all participate in this self-study project, which incorporates researchers from three universities and a research organisation. The project seeks to develop self-critique pedagogy, research and supervision (cf. Editor's introductory chapter).
2. The italicised quotes are *verbatim* voices of the authors mainly derived from teleconference and submissions made by the authors during sessions in developing the article.

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