Academic Autoethnographies: Inside Teaching in Higher Education

Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan (Eds.)

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Academic Autoethnographies: Inside Teaching in Higher Education invites readers to experience autoethnography as a challenging, complex, and creative research methodology that can produce personally, professionally, and socially useful understandings of teaching and researching in higher education. The peer-reviewed chapters offer innovative and perspicacious explorations of interrelationships between personal autobiographies, lived educational experiences, and wider social and cultural concerns, across diverse disciplines and university contexts. This edited book is distinctive within the existing body of autoethnographic scholarship in that the original research presented has been done in relation to predominantly South African university settings. This research is complemented by contributions from Canadian and Swedish scholars. The sociocultural, educational, and methodological insights communicated in this book will be valuable for specialists in the field of higher education and to those in other academic domains who are interested in self-reflexive, transformative, and creative research methodologies and methods.

“This book illuminates how autoethnography can engage authors and researchers from varied epistemological backgrounds in a reflexive multilogue about who they are and what they do. The creative representations of the lived experience of doing autoethnography sets the book apart both methodologically and theoretically, revealing how rigor and critical distance can serve to position autoethnography not only as a personal self-development tool but a tradition and method in its own right.” – Hyleen Mariaye, Associate Professor, Mauritius Institute of Education, Mauritius

“This compelling book foregrounds autoethnography as an innovative and creative research methodology to generate reflexive sociological understandings of teaching and researching across disciplines in higher education. Rich, evocative and authentic accounts reveal unique possibilities for the transformation of teaching, learning and research at personal, professional and socio-cultural levels.” – Nithi Muthukrishna, Professor Emerita, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Cover image by Chris de Beer

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Academic Autoethnographies
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Inside Teaching in Higher Education

Edited by

Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
We dedicate this book to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Liz Harrison, who sowed the seeds of *Academic Autoethnographies: Inside Teaching in Higher Education*.

We also dedicate the book to our inspiring mentor, Claudia Mitchell, who spread the seeds.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

List of Figures xi

1. Writing Academic Autoethnographies: Imagination, Serendipity and Creative Interactions  
   *Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan* 1

2. A Tinker’s Quest: Embarking on an Autoethnographic Journey in Learning “Doctoralness”  
   *Liz Harrison* 19

3. Conversations and the Cultivation of Self-Understanding  
   *Thelma Rosenberg* 33

4. Creative Self-Awareness: Conversations, Reflections and Realisations  
   *Chris de Beer* 49

5. Curating an Exhibition in a University Setting: An Autoethnographic Study of an Autoethnographic Work  
   *Lasse Reinikainen and Helène Zetterström Dahlqvist* 69

6. My Mother, My Mentor: Valuing My Mother’s Educational Influence  
   *Sizakele Makhanya* 85

7. From Exclusion through Inclusion to Being in My Element: Becoming a Higher Education Teacher across the Apartheid–Democratic Interface  
   *Delysia Norelle Timm* 95

8. Transforming Ideas of Research, Practice and Professional Development in a Faculty of Education: An Autoethnographic Study  
   *Lesley Wood* 117

   *Robert J. Balfour* 133

10. Informal Conceptual Mediation of Experience in Higher Education  
    *Bert Olivier* 149
# Table of Contents

11. Subject to Interpretation: Autoethnography and the Ethics of Writing about the Embodied Self
   
   *Rose Richards*

   Page 163

12. Autoethnography as a Wide-Angle Lens on Looking (Inward and Outward): What Difference Can This Make to Our Teaching?
   
   *Claudia Mitchell*

   Page 175

Contributors

Page 191

Index

Page 195
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Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1. Compiling the conversations on a table tennis table at home 56
Figure 4.2. A typical conversation 57
Figure 4.3. The exhibition at the gallery 58
Figure 4.4. Shelf with birds, lettering naaldekoker [dragonfly] on the wall underneath 60
Figure 4.5. Conversation #14 62
Figure 4.6. Conversation #20 63
Figure 4.7. This haiga tapped into a subconscious conversation within me 64
Figure 5.1. Field notes 72
Figure 5.2. Finding and discarding a space 74
Figure 5.3. Lasse making sure the posters are hanging right 77
Figure 5.4. Heléne stands back: How will this be received? 80
Figure 6.1. A photograph of my mother when she was young 88
Figure 6.2. The sewing machine metaphor drawing 90
Figure 7.1. UD-W response to initial application 101
Figure 7.2. Department of Indian Affairs’ response 102
Figure 7.3. University of Natal’s response 103
Figure 7.4. Only woman lecturer 105
Figure 7.5. My siblings at my graduation 106
Figure 7.6. My family at my master’s graduation 110
Figure 8.1. Dealing with feelings of exclusion 122
Figure 8.2. Change as an impossible effort 123
Figure 8.3. Visualising change in thinking of postgraduate students 128
Figure 8.4. Closing the divide 130
Figure 12.1. Spreading the seed 177
DAISY PILLAY, INBANATHAN NAICKER AND KATHLEEN PITHOUSE-MORGAN

1. WRITING ACADEMIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES

*Imagination, Serendipity and Creative Interactions*

A POETIC PRELUDE

*Creative Meanderings*

Imagination
Ordinary becomes art
Serendipity
Inviting you to enter
The self becomes a crystal

INTRODUCING ACADEMIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES

*Academic Autoethnographies: Inside Teaching in Higher Education* advances scholarship on autoethnography as a demanding, often unsettling, and necessarily imaginative research methodology that can produce personally, professionally, and socially useful understandings of teaching and researching in higher education. The book invites readers into the private and public realms of higher education academics who teach and research across diverse disciplines and university contexts. *Academic Autoethnographies* is distinctive within the existing body of autoethnographic scholarship in that most of the research presented in this book has been done in relation to South African university settings. This research is complemented by contributions from Canadian and Swedish scholars who have brought their autoethnographies into dialogue with the South African voices that take the lead in the book.

Each chapter offers a unique, perspicacious, and invitational exploration of interrelationships between personal autobiographies, lived educational experiences, and wider social and cultural concerns (Chang, 2008; Grant, Short, & Turner, 2013). The book brings together seasoned and emerging scholars who have researched their own intellectual and emotional experiences and insights to generate textured, entangled portrayals of teaching in higher education. As a collective, these original autoethnographic research texts serve as an accessible and innovative methodological toolkit for critical inquiry into university educators’ selves, experiences, and practices. They also illuminate recent and not so recent political, social, economic,
and technological developments in a rapidly changing university world (Edwards & Usher, 2008).

The editors of this book (Daisy, Inbanathan, and Kathleen) are based in a School of Education at a South African university where we teach and research in the academic specialisations of Teacher Development Studies (Daisy and Kathleen) and Educational Leadership and Management (Inbanathan). We are drawn together by a shared interest in self-reflexive research methodologies that necessitate examining, questioning, and theorising the lived experiences and selves of researchers (Pithouse-Morgan, Mitchell, & Pillay, 2014). Such self-reflexive methodologies include, but are not limited to, self-study of practice (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015), narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). We also share a view that the use of literary and visual arts-based research methods, such as poetry and drawing, can assist us to gain insights into the texture, depth, and intricacy of lived educational experiences (see, for example, Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014; van Laren et al., 2014).

Over the past few years, we have worked with colleagues on funded research projects that have resulted in co-publications (for instance, Naicker, Morojele, Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay, & Chikoko, 2014; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012; van Laren et al., 2014). We also co-supervise the research of a number of postgraduate students who are employing methodologies that require self-reflexivity. Our collaborative scholarship is strengthened by mutually supportive working relationships that have developed over time and have become central to the processes and outcomes of our research (Naicker et al., 2014). The sense of mutual trust and understanding that we share gives us confidence to take risks by trying out new ideas and creative research practices. The idea for Academic Autoethnographies came into being one day when we sat together and talked about what it was that we most wanted to learn more about as researchers and higher education teachers. What emerged from our conversation was that each of us felt the need for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of autoethnography and, in particular, its potential as a self-reflexive research methodology for higher education academics such as ourselves.

In this chapter, we begin by describing the peer review process that played a critical part in the development of Academic Autoethnographies: Inside Teaching in Higher Education. We go on to make visible our process of using the literary arts-based method of collective poetic inquiry to better understand our own learning from the chapters in this book. We explain how our individual learning was guided by particular research interests: academic identities (Daisy), academic leadership (Inbanathan), and methodological inventiveness (Kathleen). Next, we show how we brought our learnings into dialogue through a process of co-creating poetic portrayals of the diverse book chapters and of the book as whole. To conclude, we look beyond our own learning to offer a conceptual synthesis of the scholarly contributions and implications of the original research that is brought together in Academic Autoethnographies.
THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Fundamental to the development of this book was ensuring that quality standards for scholarly publication were observed. The peer review process began with a 1-day workshop for prospective book contributors to share aspects of their autoethnographic research for constructive advice from peers and to learn from expert guest presenters, Claudia Mitchell, Rose Richards, and Naydene de Lange. These three scholars shared insights gained from undertaking and supervising or mentoring autoethnographic research. They also engaged with contributors’ questions on critical issues in autoethnography as research methodology, such as ethical complexities and responsibilities (see Ellis, 2007).

In the second stage of the peer review process we asked contributing authors or pairs of coauthors to read and respond to other chapter drafts that seemed to resonate with their own, but were written in relation to different university contexts. Our intention was to offer contributors alternative critical perspectives to help strengthen their final chapters. The review process was enhanced by participation from some academics who did not contribute chapters to the book but who had relevant expertise to review particular chapter drafts. The peer reviewers are acknowledged as “chapter consultants” at the end of each chapter in this book.

Drawing on the peer response guidelines that were used in Pithouse, Mitchell, and Moletsane (2009), the prompts for the peer review feedback were as follows:

- What do you find most interesting or significant about this draft? Why?
- Do you have any questions about this draft? (For example, any points that are unclear to you or that you think could be explained more fully.) Why?
- Do you have any particular suggestions for how the authors could enhance their discussion of issues such as:
  - the positioning of the autoethnography in terms of professional, disciplinary, socio-cultural, national, etcetera, contexts;
  - how self-reflexive learning and development happens through autoethnography;
  - using diverse approaches to autoethnography (for example, memory work, arts-based methods, poetic inquiry, narrative, dialogue as method, and so forth);
  - ethical concerns in engaging in autoethnography;
  - methodological challenges and complexities in engaging in autoethnography;
  - what difference the autoethnography might make—the “so-what?” question?

The peer review comments on each chapter were sent to us. As needed, we added editorial remarks for the purposes of additional guidance or clarification. We then sent the composite review feedback to each author or pair of coauthors, who adapted the chapters accordingly. To provide support and assistance where necessary, we were involved in ongoing communication with the authors as they revised their contributions.
A COLLECTIVE POETIC INQUIRY INTO THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CHAPTERS

One of the arts-based research methods that we have been exploring together in our work with like-minded colleagues is collective poetic inquiry (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2014; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015). We have found that engaging in a process of co-composing poems can enhance and nuance our meaning making as a research team and can facilitate the growth of collective reflexivity, which we have termed “co-flexivity” (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015). Thus, as an editorial team, we chose to use a collective poetic process to inquire into our learning from the original autoethnographic research that is communicated in the 11 other chapters in this book.

We began by individually composing a series of found poems through “finding” key words and phrases in the chapters and rearranging these words and phrases into poetic form (Butler-Kisber, 2005). We each composed 11 found poems, one poem per chapter. In accordance with the conventions of found poetry, when creating the poems we only used words or phrases from the chapters and did not add any of our own (Butler-Kisber, 2005). In looking for key words and phrases in the chapters, each of us was guided by a particular research interest. Daisy focused on issues of academic identities, Inbanathan looked for aspects of the chapters related to academic leadership, and Kathleen considered the methodological contributions of the chapters.

For consistency of form across the poems, we decided to use the format of a pantoum poem as an organisational device for each poem. We anticipated that the French Malaysian pantoum format with “its repetitive lines [that allow] for the repetition of salient or emotionally evocative themes” (Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006, p. 28) would assist us to identify and communicate what we saw as most striking and significant about each poem. We created pantoums using the following 3-stanza format:

Stanza 1:
Line 1
Line 2
Line 3
Line 4

Stanza 2:
Line 5 (repeat of line 2)
Line 6
Line 7 (repeat of line 4)
Line 8

Stanza 3:
Line 9 (repeat of line 6)
Line 10 (repeat of line 3)
Line 11 (repeat of line 8)
Line 12 (repeat of line 1)
Using this 3-stanza format meant that we were limited to six lines for each poem. We therefore had to be very discriminating about what we selected from each chapter. This process of deciding on the most revealing and enlightening words and phrases forced us to think deeply about what we were learning from the chapters in relation to our particular research interests (Furman & Dill, 2015). The painstaking process of combing each chapter for the most apt words and phrases made us conscious that, although the material for our found poems came from the chapters, our selection and arrangement of that material revealed as much, if not more, about our reading of the chapters as they did about the chapters themselves (Furman, 2004).

After we each crafted 11 pantoums, we then selected words and phrases from our own poems to create a summative poem. Our intention was to distil and convey the essence of our learning from the 11 chapters in relation to our research interests. For this purpose, we used the traditional Japanese poetic format of a tanka poem (Furman & Dill, 2015). In composing our tanka, we used a version of the tanka format that has five lines, with a 5/7/5/7/7 syllable count in the lines (Poets.org, 2004). We followed the traditional configuration of the tanka, which reflects a transition from examining an image in the first two lines to examining a personal response in the final two lines, with the third line marking the beginning of that shift in perspective (Poets.org, 2004). As Furman and Dill (2015) described, by using the tanka format, “in a few words, [we were able to] convey with emotional impact ideas or patterns present” in our 11 pantoums (p. 46). Each of us then used our own tanka to guide us in writing an explanation of our overall learning from the autoethnographic research portrayed in the diverse book chapters. In the section that follows, we present the tanka and our accompanying discussion of the book chapters in relation to our research interests as well as to the transitions and shifting perspectives that characterise the chapters.

Academic Identities

Putting Ourselves into Other Positions
– Daisy Pillay

Embrace the crystal
Scenic, meandering ascent
Ordinary becomes art
I become aware anew
Activist for social change

The chapters in this book reflect the different ways the authors make sense of academic identities through nonlinear, fragmentary selves they make visible in relation to others. The individual chapters offer emerging portrayals of self as complex, meandering, situational, and open to ongoing elucidations. In creative and serendipitous autoethnographic ways, the authors trace sources of their academic becomings—opening up the private–public to vulnerability and risk-taking. Embracing the multifacetedness of the academic self becomes an aesthetic
experience—a work of art, creating versions of self through writing, photographs, cellphilms, and drawings. Each author composes “a life”—ambiguously moving in and out of self, blurring personal–social boundaries, blurring personal–cultural selves while navigating various academic positions at any one time, inside–outside of university settings.

The chapters are evocative and emotionally laden with experiences of negotiating changing academic positionings. As academic activists, questioning, challenging, and opening up beliefs, priorities, and knowledge, the authors engage in new opportunities and navigate various methodological routes with others in research relationships and communities (Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013). It is within those relationships and communities that power is reconfigured in productive ways, blurring personal–cultural experiences and personal–social meanings. This spatial-relational understanding of negotiation and positioning is helpful in making sense of the complexity of teaching experiences in higher education. The idea that the private–public of our academic selves is not a static construct, and that this bond is continually challenged, is difficult to understand. But as academics, we need to be able see through our fragmentary selves in transition and embrace the in-betweenness of change, fluidity, and instability (Usher & Edwards, 1994).

**Academic Leadership**

* A Cosmopolitan Vision  
  – Inbanathan Naicker

Influence thinking  
I had to be strategic  
Transgress boundaries  
Re-imagining transformation  
I aspired to lead

Leadership, a term in vogue over the past 20 years (as opposed to management), is about change, development, and movement (Townsend & MacBeath, 2011). It incorporates vision setting and influence. Within educational institutions (e.g., schools, colleges, and universities), the practical activity of leadership takes place on a daily basis (Bush, 2010) where leadership as practice becomes part of the social fabric of organisations. It is about the daily collaborations and exchanges that occur between leaders, followers, and the situations within which they are located. Leadership practice is about the repertoire of behaviours that leaders harness and deploy in their “moment-by-moment interactions in a particular place and time” (Harris, Moos, Moller, Robertson, & Spillane, 2007, p. 3). It encompasses the lived actions of leaders and the manoeuvres they engage in order to accomplish the vision, mission, and goals for their organisation (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). In order to understand and make meaning of leadership practice, researching practice is an imperative. To research practice, Kempster and Stewart (2010) called
for innovative methodologies to be employed in order to deepen our understanding of leadership practice. To this end, Starr (2014) advocated autoethnography as an effective means to study the practice of leadership.

The different chapters in the book foreground through autoethnography the complex, contextual, and contested nature of leadership and leadership practice. From leadership being viewed as a constricted heteronomous space where there is marginalisation and a struggle for inclusion, to embracing leadership that is invitational and authentic in order to transform thinking, autoethnography has provided leaders (the authors) with “a self-narrative that critiques the situations of the self with others in [diverse] social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710) which, for Chang (2008, p. 52), were “keys to self-understanding” and “self-transformation.” It has allowed leaders (the authors) to be reflexive about what they do and the moves they make by “complexifying” their thinking about their leadership to “deliberately expose contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and possibilities” (Vickers, 2010, p. 275).

The practice of leadership is not confined to formally appointed leaders such as deans, research leaders, and heads of schools. Rather, leadership can be stretched across institutions to include informal leaders (persons who are not formally appointed to leadership positions) such as teachers (lecturers) in higher education (Spillane, 2006). Several of the chapters highlight how the authors are playing a teacher leadership role in their lecture rooms and halls by engaging in creative pedagogies, transforming pedagogic spaces, inculcating collaborative values, becoming agents of social change, mentoring students and fellow colleagues, and more importantly becoming self-reflexive practitioners.

Methodological Inventiveness

_To Produce Something Valuable_
– Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan

Imagination
Creative interactions
Serendipity
My self becomes an art space
Inviting you to enter

The diverse chapters in this book are characterised by the authors’ imaginative engagement to awaken creative—often arts-based, collaborative, and transdisciplinary—modes of researching that push the boundaries of what counts as new knowing within and beyond the realm of autoethnography. The chapters illustrate “methodological inventiveness” by making visible how the authors “[have taken] an unconventional, innovative direction in their research [through employing] their powers of creativity in surprising ways” (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p. 169). Significantly, as Claudia Mitchell cautions in her chapter in this book, such methodological inventiveness is not “innovation for the sake of innovation.”
Rather, it is innovation for the sake of enhancing and nuancing interplay between inner and outer dialogues, personal, cultural, and educational implications, self-understanding and social change. Through creative means, the chapters offer rich, embodied portraits of educational experiences that are interwoven in dense tapestries of relationships with people, places, and histories and yet are also shifting, fluid, and alive with transformative possibility. These vibrant portrayals invite readers to become involved in the researchers’ lived dilemmas and discoveries in embodied and empathic ways. They also reveal how methodological inventiveness can sometimes enter into research experience in surprising ways, and that it might vanish just as suddenly if the researcher is not paying attention or is not open to the unexpected. This openness to spontaneity and serendipity is offset by a mindfulness of methodological guideposts that have been established by the autoethnographic scholarly community (see, for example, Chang, 2008; Ellis & Adams, 2014). It is such balance between structure and openness that provides the necessary orientation and momentum for an autoethnographic inquiry.

Dadds and Hart (2001) highlighted how imaginative engagement to stimulate alternative methodological modes could contribute to generative ways of knowing, with wider implications for social change. A generative research stance is inspired by “a calling to contribute to the well-being of others, particularly younger people” (Pithouse-Morgan & van Laren, 2012, p. 417). Of course, in autoethnography the central research participant is the researcher herself but as the chapters demonstrate, autoethnographic researchers look through the multifaceted lens of the self to consider issues of wider sociocultural significance beyond the self. And, as Ball (2012) pointed out, the development of such a generative research stance is often accompanied by a concomitant growth in methodological inventiveness: “As researchers move toward generativity, their internal changes are reflected externally in their changing research practices—as it becomes more inventive, more responsive” (p. 289). Each chapter in this book demonstrates a movement towards generativity as the authors look inward and outward to question how they are moved to act as researchers and educators, and what the possible educational consequences and legacies of those actions may be. The chapters also show how such generative insights develop through the process of autoethnographic writing itself. It is in finding imaginative ways to communicate our insights with other people that these insights deepen and broaden, while simultaneously inviting responses from others. Taken as a whole, the autoethnographic chapters in this book exemplify a methodological stance that was aptly described by Elliot Eisner (2004):

It is an educational [research] culture that has a greater focus on becoming than on being, places more value on the imaginative than on the factual, assigns greater priority to valuing than to measuring, and regards the quality of the journey as more educationally significant than the speed at which the destination is reached. (p. 10)
Once each member of the editorial team had crafted her or his individual poems, we met to bring our varied readings of the chapters into dialogue by creating one composite pantoum for each chapter. We worked chapter by chapter, looking across the three pantoums for each chapter. We projected these poems onto a screen and selected two lines from each poem. We then used the six chosen lines to co-compose a new pantoum for the chapter. In co-creating these poems, we typed in a Word document that was projected onto the screen. This helped us to see the emergence of every composite poem. We worked carefully with the six chosen lines to find the most visually and rhythmically pleasing configuration for each poem. This involved removing words that seemed less important, adding punctuation for emphasis, reconstructing lines by reordering words, as well as rearranging the order of lines. This collective poetry-making process took a day of intense, collective focus and resulted in the 11 co-composed pantoums that follow.

I Speak to the Moment
– Inspired by the words of Liz Harrison

A stranger in a strange land
Miss Harrison, not Ms or Liz?
Networks of collegial support
Visions of a brighter future
Miss Harrison, not Ms or Liz?
I go back in my history
Visions of a brighter future
I speak to the moment
I go back in my history
Networks of collegial support
I speak to the moment
A stranger in a strange land

Moving my Gaze
– Inspired by the words of Thelma Rosenberg

Uncomfortable vulnerability
Conversations …
Stages of uncertainty
A meandering ascent
Conversations …
Moving my gaze
A meandering ascent
Restoring my vision
Moving my gaze
Stages of uncertainty
Restoring my vision
Uncomfortable vulnerability

A Rich Tapestry
– Inspired by the words of Chris de Beer

Impromptu interactions, creative impulses
A rich tapestry, a dense conversation
Aspects of my creative self
Subtle, inexpressible and layered

A rich tapestry, a dense conversation
Stage managing collaborations
Subtle, inexpressible and layered
Realisations about creative selves

Stage managing collaborations
Aspects of my creative self
Realisations about creative selves
Impromptu interactions, creative impulses

Private becomes Public
– Inspired by the words of Lasse Reinikainen and Heléne Zetterström Dahlqvist

Studying inwards
Thinking differently
Ordinary becomes art
Private becomes public

Thinking differently
We found new spaces
Private becomes public
To inspire social change

We found new spaces
Ordinary becomes art
To inspire social change
Studying inwards

To Discover Connections
– Inspired by the words of Sizakele Makhanya

Values give me direction
Creativity, trust and freedom
One person guides the other
To produce something valuable
Creativity, trust and freedom
I value these …
To produce something valuable
To discover connections
I value these …
One person guides the other
To discover connections
Values give me direction

*I Took a Risk*
– Inspired by the words of Delysia Norelle Timm
I took a risk
I observed my self
Retracing pain and brokenness
Felt in my whole being
I observed my self
Uncovering deep reserves of intuition
Felt in my whole being
I had to be resilient
Uncovering deep reserves of intuition
Retracing pain and brokenness
I had to be resilient
I took a risk

*The Picture Looks Different*
– Inspired by the words of Lesley Wood
An advocate of new ideas
An activist for change
Join me in stepping out
Becoming other-centred
An activist for change
The picture looks different
Becoming other-centred
Inviting you to enter
The picture looks different
Join me in stepping out
Inviting you to enter
An advocate of new ideas

*Transforming the Text*
– Inspired by the words of Robert J. Balfour

Identity constricted
Disclosure?
Safe spaces?
Tenuous … ambiguous …

Disclosure?
Transforming the text
Tenuous … ambiguous …
Nuancing difference
Transforming the text
Safe spaces?
Nuancing difference
Identity constricted

*Creative Enactment*
– Inspired by the words of Bert Olivier

To become whole again
I chose storytelling
Creative enactment
Made possible by the novel

I chose storytelling
With unpredictable results
Made possible by the novel
Enjoyment!

With unpredictable results
Creative enactment
Enjoyment!
To become whole again

*I Can Never Walk Away*
– Inspired by the words of Rose Richards

I am a long-term survivor
Voices of my experience dialogue
A fragmentary, raggedy story
Challenging the status quo
Voices of my experience dialogue
We should live what we teach
Challenging the status quo
I can never walk away

We should live what we teach
A fragmentary, raggedy story
I can never walk away
I am a long-term survivor

I Become Aware Anew
– Inspired by the words of Claudia Mitchell

Doing something different
Serendipity and making-do
I see spaces transformed
A footpath becomes an art space

Serendipity and making-do
Building collaborative relationships
A footpath becomes an art space
I become aware anew

Building collaborative relationships
I see spaces transformed
I become aware anew
Doing something different

After we had created a composite pantoum for each chapter, we decided to fashion a collective tanka from our three individual tanka. We used words from our three tanka to craft one poem to communicate the heart of our mutual learning as an editorial team. We titled the poem, “Creative Meanderings.”

Creative Meanderings

Imagination
Ordinary becomes art
Serendipity
Inviting you to enter
The self becomes a crystal

The “Creative Meanderings” poem expresses our understanding that academic autoethnographies show us the fluidity, ambiguity, and complexity of who we are and what we do as academics, teachers, and researchers. As we use creative means to look through the multidimensional lens of the academic self to better understand human
culture in relation to lived educational experience, the self becomes translucent. Like a prism or crystal, when light moves through the multifaceted self it separates into a spectrum of colours that illuminate and transform seemingly ordinary aspects of human experience, allowing researchers and audience to see anew. As the 13th-century Zen master, Dogen, explained, “We study the self to forget the self. When you forget the self you become one with the ten thousand things” (as cited in Snyder, 2004, p. 30).

LOOKING FORWARD AND OUTWARD THROUGH AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LENS

In this chapter, we, as an editorial team, have made visible our learning about academic autoethnographies. We have seen how the methodological inventiveness that is required by autoethnography can evoke creative research practices that stimulate the imagination and deepen the insights of both the researcher or author and the audience or reader. These creative research practices become catalysts for, and are invigorated by, intuition and spontaneity while methodological guideposts offered by the autoethnographic scholarly community provide indispensable orientation as researchers move into the unknown. Despite the foregrounding of the self or “auto,” autoethnography is not solipsistic or narcissistic. The contingent, fragmentary selves that are made visible become multifaceted, translucent lenses through which to make new and generative meanings of complex cultural phenomena, with wider implications for social change.

Overall, Academic Autoethnographies: Inside Teaching in Higher Education invites readers to experience autoethnographic research as a challenging, complex, and potentially transformative methodology for facilitating sociocultural understandings of academic selves and of teaching in higher education. The book will be useful to specialists in the field of higher education and to those in other academic domains who are interested in self-reflexive and creative research methodologies and methods. The sociocultural, educational, and methodological insights communicated by this book will be valuable for scholars both within and beyond South African university contexts.

The processes of discovery that are demonstrated in each chapter also point to the potential of autoethnography as a generative mode of what Webster-Wright (2009) called “authentic professional learning . . . [that encourages] a spirit of critical inquiry where professionals can gain insight into their own learning and the assumptions they hold about their practice” (p. 272). To this we would add that autoethnography as a mode of authentic professional learning in higher education can facilitate critical insights into the beliefs and assumptions we hold about our academic selves and about the selves of the others with whom we interact. Autoethnography has potential to deepen and extend our understandings of lived educational experiences through the articulation and acknowledgment of how selves are sociocultural, political, and historical. As C. Wright Mills reminds us, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (1959, p. 3).
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NOTE

1 For an explanation of cellphilms, see Claudia Mitchell’s chapter in this book, “Autoethnography as a Wide-Angle Lens on Looking (Inward and Outward): What Difference Can This Make to Our Teaching?”

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2. A TINKER’S QUEST

Embarking on an Autoethnographic Journey in Learning “Doctoralness”

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be, so in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

(Cooley, 1902, p. 184)

INTRODUCTION

I think of myself as a tinker. Specifically, as an educator, I think of myself as a tinker-thinker. The word *tinker* refers to an itinerant, a gypsy, or one who enjoys experimenting with things or a travelling repairer of useful items. The word also refers to random unplanned work or activities. In my work and teaching, the more I engage with what makes learning possible, the further away from a well-defined occupational identity I seem to travel. In my forties, I discovered the possibility of “being an academic” after completing a master’s degree and beginning to toy with the idea of doctoral study. I am asking what it means to be “academic,” a doctoral candidate or student or graduate in territories opened by critical postmodernists where a central question is, “What is knowledge and whose knowledge counts?” This chapter is a tale of identity construction and finding a sense of purpose in South African higher education. It explores the contribution of knowledge construction to the potential selves that are available to me, and vice versa. Knowledge construction is considered in several senses: in the way being knowledgeable, as a characteristic, is put together and meaning made by an individual, a family, a social group, and institution, and a country, over time and space, in order to make sense of a lived world. In another sense, I am attempting to look at what processes occur as the valuing, judicial-political-economic-academic eye reconsiders and reconstructs the knowledge creation process. What does it mean and what value does it hold for humanity?
LEARNING “DOCTORALNESS”

The temporal paradox of the subject is such that, of necessity, we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own becoming. That ‘becoming’ is not simple or a continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being. (Butler, 1997, p. 30)

A good teacher, I have come to believe, is the ultimate salesperson: She sells notions, aspirations, and ideas. She uncovers the need, sources a solution—maximising the benefits and minimising the costs. She negotiates. She persuades her customers to believe that she knows and is right about what is right for them. And they leave without any physical artefact to show for the transaction. Thinking about a teacher as a salesperson seems appropriate in the current context of globalisation and the increasingly managerialist policy discourses around governance in higher education.

Today I, as a tinker-thinker, am selling mirrors. Yesterday I sold cosmetics and tomorrow, perhaps, I will sell snake oil again. The mirrors I sell today represent ideas of self—stock that I have acquired on my thought-journey towards completing my doctorate: an autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Tedlock, 2005) about acquiring a doctoral identity. Does such a thing as a doctoral identity exist? Is gaining a doctorate simply about the next rung on the career ladder or does it represent more? If so what is that thing? Is it only a thing or many?

A doctorate gives an individual a “right of way” in most social contexts and “such people assume their privileged position, not realising that other identities might be silenced in their presence” (Burkitt, 2008, p. 4). When I started thinking about my doctorate, I had to deal with the question of why it would be a valuable and worthy thing to do. I was already wrestling with the notion of the value of being an academic in South Africa and, in the process, confronting ideas that had not even crossed my mind at the simplest level in 10 years of teaching in a higher education institution: Why is it important to read, critique, evaluate, and persuade in academic forms? Why is it important to teach others to do this and in this particular form? Who cares? And, more suspiciously, why do they care?

I have chosen autoethnography as the methodology through which I will try to answer my own questions about how a doctoral identity is constructed and why I have constructed it in the ways I have. Through this methodology, I will raise questions about what having a doctorate might mean in South Africa in the 21st century. I see autoethnography as a subset of self-study, in the same way that autobiography might be. Both self-study and autoethnography make lived experience central to analysis and require the researcher to be reflexively oriented towards social change. Whereas much of the current work on self-study has come out of the field of education and is “related to the idea of studying the ‘self’ of teaching as a specific activity of teachers focusing on their own teaching practices” (Mitchell, Weber, & O’Reilly-Scanlon, 2005, p. 2), autoethnography has its roots in sociology and social anthropology. Tedlock (2005, p. 467) suggested that autoethnography emerged
as researchers attempted to “reflect on and engage with their own participation within an ethnographic frame” in an “attempt to heal the split between the public and private realms by connecting the autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward) with the ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward).” In this chapter, I reflect on the process and the meaning of doctoral learning from my own insider perspective as a learner in the doctoral process. This chapter also serves as a preliminary part of the autoethnography that I am undertaking for my doctoral study.

Simply put, “autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to the culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). As Heewon Chang (2008) pointed out, autoethnography has been defined in multiple ways by many practitioners, ranging from those favouring an attempt at objective analysis of culture (for example, Anderson, 2006), to those embracing more descriptive or performative storytelling. Bochner and Ellis (2002) showed how autoethnographies can vary in emphasis around three axes: the self (auto), culture (ethno), and the research process (graphy). My aim is to write an autoethnography “that is ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (Chang, 2008, p. 48). I am questioning the role of my culture in education and vice versa through my own narrative (the primary data), using ethnographic texts such as journals (which I started keeping in 2002 when I felt that I could possibly start exploring the idea of a “doing a doctorate”), photographs, the accounts of others, and e-mails. These texts are used as triggers to enable me to story my educational experiences and the context in which they occurred and are occurring. Methodologically, it is in my writing and self-analysis that I am able to see culture at work and to question implicit assumptions. My storying of the texts and artefacts of daily life gives expression to the discourses at play in doctoral education and insight into the cultural structures that sustain and are sustained by these discourses.

My account of learning to be a doctoral graduate, and therefore, of learning “doctoralness,” or that level of knowledge work currently accepted as worthy of a doctorate, will enable the “back and forth gaze” inward towards the personal and outward to the social, marrying the private and the public realms (Tedlock, 2005, p. 467). My exploration is of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of interaction (personal/social), continuity (past, present, future), and situation (place) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) in my experience of doctoral learning. The auto part of autoethnography, my story of becoming, provides access to a view of a culture (English and white) which, at face value, continues to dominate the operation of education in South Africa. This investigation includes an interrogation of linguistic and discursive agency (Butler, 1990) and also highlights class barriers to epistemological access to graduate status that may be compounded by other challenges (see Conolly et al., 2009). I believe my social position as linguistically and economically privileged whilst being part of a political minority in South Africa places me in a liminal space that makes it possible for me to make overt some implicit assumptions about doctoral education and to explore possible implications for African ways of knowing in higher education.
I am a member of a doctoral (PhD) support group called PaperHeaDs, established in 2001. The group has no direct institutional affiliation and its members range in age from early 30s to early 60s, and all are women academics. All of us could be considered “insiders” to the academic discourses (Gee, 1996) of higher education in South Africa because our work experience is so closely related to our doctoral studies. Our unique positions as both learners and educators within higher education offer a lens through which to look at how academic learning might be constructed.

Through my conversations with my fellow PaperHeaDs, I have come to see that the title of “Doctor” is valuable to me as providing weight to my voice and the opportunity to speak for change. In order to do that, to see myself as one who deserves the public acknowledgement of my ability to know; I have to tell a different story about myself. My discovery of my tinker-thinker self has come in the process of re-storying myself (Bochner, 1997; Richardson, 1997). The trigger for this chapter was a phenomenological interview, in which I was interviewed by one of my fellow PaperHeaDs. A phenomenological interview is a conversation that explores the meaning of a phenomenon by continually asking questions about its meaning as experienced. Claire1 started by asking me what I thought a doctoral identity should mean:

Liz: … I would think that, for me, part of it is an idea of wisdom, which is not the same as knowing. Um, and for me that seems to be more aligned with kind of Afrocentric ways of looking at the world. That people are honoured for their experience and their …

Claire: Okay.

Liz: … wisdom and hearing—I mean the latest stuff about Mandela’s birthday and the reflection on his life and the sort of interrogation of that is almost making—highlighting that for me and I’m wondering why, given Africa and its problems and its brilliances, why our notion of a doctorate is not more aligned with that notion of a wise person, somebody who knows and who can mediate and arbitrate and strategise and do what’s necessary for the common good, whereas the sort of stuff that I’m really quite comfortable with is an almost Eurocentric view of ‘look after the individual,’ ‘go for yourself,’ it’s all about achievement, it’s a status, it’s the next rung on the ladder, that kind of discourse, so I’m wondering why we don’t go there … and part of that is also then why—if I reject the Eurocentric view of what a doctorate represents as somebody who knows a lot … pretty much, an expert and therefore has the voice from what’s known and their ability to apply a critical—particular critical frame to things—why—if—how I can take that notion and say it’s valid in Africa, given the cultural basis of leadership and wisdom and so on and, in that case where does identity focus because identity is about individuality—one would
A TINKER’S QUEST

think—in some interpretations of identity, so … does that answer the question? [giggles]—yadda, yadda yadda [self-deprecating].

Claire: It’s about what you’re beginning to construct as what a doctoral identity should be about, or the purpose of a doctorate and maybe what a doctoral identity should look like and the purpose of a doctorate—are they two different things?

The conversation continued. Having had this 2-hour-long exploration with Claire, I needed to go back in my history to find out how, where, and why I had come to the positions I articulated in our deconstruction of the meaning of doctoral identity and what a doctorate might represent.

What Counts as Knowing?

My mistrust of “the academic” is genealogical. My family roots itself in the Cockneys of East End London—butchers and bakers, and the stolid artisans of Yorkshire. My mother was the first of her family to get a post-secondary education and to enter a profession, as a nurse. My father had 7 years of schooling before joining the army with the ambition of being a truck driver. He became one of the first computer systems engineers with IBM. When I went to university, an option that would not have existed without a bursary from IBM, I was the first-ever academic student in my family. To this, my grandfather, a recently retired CEO (“by the sweat of his brow”) of a heavy engineering company, rolled his eyes, leaned back in his La-Z-Boy armchair, and made the gesture of pulling a toilet chain. “Students,” he pronounced, “ticks on the public ox.”

Doing well at school was praised in my family but individual initiative, hard work, and practical results drew the rewards of true regard and earshotted boasting. The mistrust of scholarly things and scholars haunts my work today. “What practical value lies in this idea?” I ask myself as I scrabble to find a cognitive tool to justify the hours of reading and writing. “Call a spade a spade, Liz,” the voice of my family says, “you just have to look to see that such and such is true.” (The such and such category contains politics, the nature of human beings, gender roles, capacities, recipes, and health advice to live by). I miss the blissful ignorance of the matrices of power and knowledge that governs their view of normality and what is real (Foucault, 1980).

My family understands teaching. “A teacher, eh?” they said as I announced my intention to study for a teaching diploma. “Nice job if you can get it—no heavy lifting.” (For me this was an illustration of an unawareness of the physicality of teaching: of carrying stacks of books, of the irritation of chalk dust under one’s contact lenses, of rearranging furniture for group work.) Something is done, activity takes place, products are created, and the “truth” of things is passed along. A recent e-mail from a close female relative, in response to my attempt to explain my
excitement about Judith Butler’s theorising of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), testified to this:

I suspect I’m being blinded by science, there is no way I would even attempt to read those books; I can barely manage three pages of a bodice ripper before drifting into the arms of Morpheus. However, my English teacher would be spinning in her grave; you are reading stuff of the Y generation, where due to their poor English grammar and vocabulary they make stuff up. Not that I’m so great, but you got a degree and are supposed to know these things! Expertness—try expertise. Performability—try performance, i.e. acting! Way back in the mists of time when I attempted to learn some psychology we had a lecture about integrity and congruence and getting them to blend into a whole that resulted in better mental health. Which I understood to mean that if you try to put on performances that are not how you really are you will go bonkers! After all the study and working in academia you have done, I can’t see that you need to ‘perform’ anything, you just are. (Private communication with permission, name withheld, 2008)

The ironic tone of the communication makes me laugh now: “blinded by science,” “teacher spinning in her grave” (the voice of a long-dead authority, one who knew the truth?). And how about the notion that I am “supposed to know” on the strength of a degree (or several) or even on the basis of my experience in academia? It seems that the more that I am supposed to know, the less I can claim “knowingness.” What is interesting is that there is no questioning of the idea that people who know do exist. My relative’s easy access to the world of words and text, albeit bodice rippers, to the idea of people who think for a living (however mysterious the work might be), to the ability to play with genres in English—the colloquial to the analytic, are symptomatic of middle-class access to the printed word.

**Why Know?**

Along the way, family cynicism has turned to the content of what I teach. When I was teaching in a programme that trained child and youth care workers, my family felt it ironic, that I, who had chosen not to have children, was educating youngsters in how to take care of children at risk. My own sense of the irony, or possibly a sense of fraud, led me to move into academic development work, specifically, inducting new lecturers into their teaching roles in a higher education institution. These were bright young people, successful in their studies, who to a person claimed that their biggest achievement to that date was being selected to teach at our institution. My job was to introduce them to the often arcane ways in which higher education operates, to flag the path through the micropolitical dynamics to the place of satisfaction in teaching well. I was selling snake oil: “Do it this way and you will thrive in the system. Set up your networks of collegial support, give to each other in order to get back and you will not regret the emotional credit you will derive.”