

Entering an ambiguous space: Evoking polyvocality in educational research through collective poetic inquiry

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We explore how the participatory, literary arts-based methodology of collective poetic inquiry can facilitate awareness of, and insight into polyvocality in educational research. Using found poetry and haiku poetry, we present a poetic performance in which we engage with diverse voices that manifest in multiple data sources: a student participant's photographic collage and unstructured interview transcript; audio-recorded discussions with research team members and a conference audience, and research team members' written reflections. We aim to contribute to methodological conversations about poetry as research, with a particular focus on understanding more about the potential of collective poetic inquiry for evoking polyvocality in educational research. Drawing on notions of 'un-knowing', 'not-knowing' and 'productive ambiguity', we conceptualise our participatory research process as polyvocal and invite readers to join us in considering how cultivating polyvocality in educational research might bring about change in ourselves and in our ways of

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knowing as members of research communities. The article highlights our evolving understanding that how we research shapes and reshapes what we come to know and un-know and how we communicate that knowing.

Keywords: collective poetic inquiry, literary arts-based methodologies, participatory research, performativity, polyvocality, productive ambiguity

Introduction

Polyvocality in research

As academic researchers, we are required to refer to published work to acknowledge the roles that others have played in our thinking. Thus, we value conventions of academic citations and referencing in distinguishing and bringing into dialogue our own voices and the voices of diverse scholars in our research texts. This polyvocal dimension of research has been described with the metaphor of a conversation. For example, Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 136) advise researchers preparing for a new study to “ask questions about what scholarly conversations we want to engage in”. Similarly, Badley (2009a: 107) explains academic writing “as a process of reflecting upon our experience and on the experience of others in an attempt to make useful suggestions for change and growth as part of a conversation in progress”.

Polyvocality, voice and voicelessness have been the focus of scholarly conversations in which educational researchers have sought to address a perceived absence of the voices of those most directly affected by the research: learners or students (and their families and communities) and teachers or educators. Regarding teachers’ voices, Gitlin (1990: 443) argued for “educative research [as] a dialogical approach that attempts to develop ... teachers’ voices” as producers of research knowledge. Subsequently, Hargreaves (1996: 12-13) acknowledged that teachers’ voices have “frequently been silenced ... and suppressed or distorted within educational research”, but cautioned that diverse teachers’ voices are too often reduced to “*the teacher’s voice*” and that certain teachers’ voices tend to be “represented and sponsored in isolation from or to the exclusion of other voices”.

More recently, Mitchell, De Lange, Moletsane, Stuart and Buthelezi (2005: 258) proposed that educational researchers should aim not only to elicit and communicate teachers’ voices, but also to assist “groups such as teachers and community health workers, ... [to] hear each other”. In response to concerns about voice, voicelessness and polyvocality, an increasing number of educational researchers are turning to participatory (often arts-based) methodologies in order to engage learners, teachers and community members as vocal partners in studies that aim to address educational and social challenges (e.g., Mitchell *et al.*, 2005; Theron, 2012).

However, tensions with respect to polyvocality, voice and voicelessness are also apparent in debates on participatory research, particularly forms of participatory

research where “community members, or stakeholders in communities, collaborate with researchers in addressing needs and enhancing resilience and well-being in societies” (Ferreira, 2012: 512). On the one hand, the principal intention of such participatory research is to give community members a voice in public research conversations (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). On the other hand, concerns are raised about whose voices are indeed present, how diverse voices are re-presented, and which voices dominate in participatory research analysis and research texts (for example, Borg, Karlsson, Kim & McCormack, 2012; Riecken, Strong-Wilson, Conibear, Michel & Riecken, 2005). Hence Riecken *et al.* (2005: paragraph 2) argue for paying specific attention to “an ethic of voice and voicing” in participatory research.

Polyvocality is thus a central and challenging issue in scholarly conversations that seek to understand how educational and participatory research can make a qualitative difference to the lives of ‘the researched’. As Mitchell (2008: 257-258) explains, in these conversations “questions of the social responsibility of the academic researcher (including postgraduate students as new researchers, along with experienced researchers expanding their repertoire of being and doing) are critical”.

From another perspective, Smith (1997) considers the social responsibility of the academic researcher in relation to how researchers within the broad educational research community engage each other in conversation. He (Smith, 1997: 10) argues that, within this community, “different vocabularies ... are being used to tell different stories to ourselves and to others about research and about who we are as educational researchers”. Smith (1997: 11) raises a concern about educational researchers dividing into warring factions that appear to be unwilling to participate in polyvocal conversations “to cultivate and maintain a pluralism of vocabularies and stories”.

Sparkes (1991: 103), who is similarly concerned “to enhance the possibilities of critical dialogue [across factions] within the [educational] research community so that understanding might prevail”, suggests that factionalism might be mitigated by researchers developing “critical and reflective self-awareness” of the “taken-for-granted” ways in which we construct research texts. He argues that a heightened consciousness of research texts as “literary enterprises” could be a “vital first [step] in opening up the possibilities for entertaining alternative views and exploring the intellectual landscape of others”.

Likewise, Vasudevan (2011: paragraphs 2-4) proposes that “at a time when evidence of human diversity is in abundance and accessible like no time before”, educational researchers should participate in self-reflexive conversations in which we inquire into “how our [diverse] ways of knowing come to be established”. In this article, we take up this challenge of making visible our ways of knowing, as we explore the potential of collective poetic inquiry for evoking polyvocality in educational research. Our conceptualisation of polyvocality is dialogic, as we focus on what

emerges through the “interillumination” or “interanimation” (Holquist, 1981: 429-430) of diverse voices.

Poetry as research

Increasingly, qualitative researchers within and beyond the domain of educational research have been exploring poetry as a literary arts-based research medium. Poetry is understood as a means of representing the distinctiveness, complexity and plurality of the voices of research participants and researchers (Kennedy, 2009; Richardson, 2000). In addition, poetry is acknowledged as a mode of research analysis that can heighten creativity and reflexivity (Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, Richard & Schendel, 2010; Richardson, 2003).

There is also a growing awareness of the participatory potential of poetry as research. For instance, MacKenzie (2012) engaged participants in creating individual and collective poems during a participatory research process, whereas Hopper and Sanford (2008) used their poetic representations of participants’ responses to involve the participants in data analysis. Co-researchers Lahman *et al.* (2010: 45) offered a reflexive account of how their participatory methodological journey as a research poetry group enabled them to “create meaning from one another and to construct their individual and shared meanings of this creative and thought provoking process”.

Researchers who pay particular attention to the performative dimensions of poetry as research have proposed that notions of research participation should include the live or virtual performance of poems and engagement with audience or reader responses as a way of assisting researchers to contextualise, deepen and rethink their research learning and knowing (Lapum, 2008; Wiebe, 2008). Scholarly conversations about poetry and research have also taken into account debates on polyvocality, voice and voicelessness in participatory research. In particular, researchers have paid attention to issues of ethics concerning the voices of participants whose words serve as ‘raw material’ for poems created by researchers or who contribute their own poems to the research (Kennedy, 2009; Richardson, 2000).

We aim to contribute to methodological conversations about poetry as research, with a focus on understanding more about the potential of collective poetic inquiry for evoking polyvocality in educational research. This article is written as a poetic performance to bring into conversation our diverse researcher voices and perspectives, as well as those of our research participants and research audiences. We encourage readers to read the poems aloud, to engage with them through multiple senses, and to be aware of thoughts and feelings that they might evoke (Lapum, 2008; Leggo, 2008). While we do not make any claims about the inherent artistic or literary merit of our poems, we offer them as demonstrations of our “knowing in the making” (Badley, 2009a: 108) and as invitations to join us in continuing participatory inquiry.

The poems are interwoven with research discussions in which we take a reflexive stance to make visible how we are coming to know as educational researchers (Badley,

2009a; Vasudevan, 2011; Vinz, 1997). Through these discussions we endeavour to open up our research knowing for ongoing questioning and meaning-making.

Setting the scene

We are a research team of five academics and one postgraduate student, all located in a School of Education at one university. We teach, study and research within the disciplines of Educational Psychology, Teacher Development Studies, Social Justice Education and Education Leadership, as well as Management and Policy Studies. Accordingly, we participate in varied theoretical and methodological conversations within the broad educational research community. While we are all currently situated in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, we grew up in diverse social and linguistic contexts in Lesotho, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Over the past two years, we have been working together to research the phenomenon of internationalisation and related possibilities for knowledge-making and knowledge interchange within our university community. Our shared interest in this topic stems from experiences of having been international students ourselves and of studying, teaching and researching within international university communities. Student enrolment records at our University indicate a strong representation of international students in a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. We have been asking questions as to what lies beyond the statistics in order to better understand what we can learn from international and local postgraduate students' stories of social and academic experiences within our University community.

Prior to conducting our research, we obtained full ethical clearance from our institution. The first phase of our research project focused specifically on stories told by African international postgraduate students (students from African countries outside of South Africa). Part of this research has been communicated in a recent article (Pithouse-Morgan, Morojele, Pillay, Naicker, Chikoko, Ramkelawan & Rajpal, 2012), in which we took a narrative inquiry stance to explore what we could learn from one student's stories of his experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We used narrative vignettes – brief evocative scenes or accounts– to re-present data generated through unstructured interviews and collage-making. The vignettes portrayed how this student's daily life on campus was constrained by his anxiety about xenophobic harassment and violence. Hence, we argued that the pedagogic setting for his learning was educationally unsound, even when effective teaching and learning activities might be occurring in designated spaces. To conclude, we deliberated on possibilities for cultivating pedagogic settings that are favourable and safe for all those who learn and teach within them.

After writing the article, we decided to explore the concept of 'pedagogic settings' in more depth for a conference presentation. As discussed in Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* (2012), we were working with an understanding of *setting* as a literary or narrative element (Coulter & Smith, 2009). From a narrative perspective, a setting

is more than a backdrop for stories of experience; it is an intrinsic and influential (yet often intangible) element in these stories. Our view of pedagogy was influenced by humanist and phenomenological perspectives that emphasise experiential, formative and relational aspects of learning and teaching processes (Allender, 2004; Van Manen, 1990).

Deciding to try collective poetic inquiry

Research discussion

We scheduled a three-day writing retreat to prepare for our upcoming presentation. Prior to the retreat, Kathleen, who had used found poetry (extracts from data sources re-presented in poetic form) in her PhD research (Pithouse, 2007), emailed other team members to suggest poetic inquiry as a literary arts-based methodology that would resonate with the conception of setting as a literary element. She also sent team members an article on poetic inquiry by Butler-Kisber (2002).

We began the retreat with an animated and heated conversation about poetry as research, using the Butler-Kisber article (2002) to orientate us. Some team members, who were unfamiliar with poetic inquiry, expressed some reservations about using this 'non-traditional' methodology. Kathleen explained that she had not been involved in *collective* poetic inquiry previously, so this would be a new experience for her. We realised that poetic inquiry would require each of us to take "a non-expert stance", which is risky for educational researchers who are "called upon more often to demonstrate expertise than to render visible the 'unexpected' in their stances of inquiry" (Vasudevan, 2011: paragraph 2).

We audio-recorded and transcribed this initial conversation and, at a subsequent writing retreat, we returned to the recording and transcript to construct found poems to capture the polyvocal content and tone of our discussion (Pithouse, 2007). In co-creating these poems, we listened to the recording and viewed the transcript projected onto a screen. We found that listening to the recording enabled us to re-experience the discussion in a more direct and vivid manner (Pithouse, 2007). It was also useful to view the transcript so as to pay close attention to each word. We used the highlighting function in Word to colour-code sections of the transcript that seemed significant and to resonate with each other. We then reworked these extracts into found poems. This involved repeating or removing words and phrases that seemed more or less important, constructing lines and stanzas by rearranging words and phrases and inserting breaks and spaces, while noting visual patterns and listening to rhythms (Leggo, 2008). Thus, we had to pay close and sustained attention to "the relation of part to part and parts to the whole" (Leggo, 2008: 167). In keeping with the conventions of found poetry, we did not add any words or phrases that did not appear in the transcript (Butler-Kisber, 2002).

The poetry-making process required continual reading and re-reading (both silent and aloud) of the transcript and the emerging poems. It also involved bringing into dialogue our individual memories of the discussion and our retrospective responses to the recording and transcript. Commonalities and differences in what we remembered revealed diverse ways in which we had made meaning of the discussion, and pointed to its most significant aspects. The poetry-making process demanded that we explain our understandings and come to consensus on what to portray and how to do so through the found poems. This required what Leggo (2008: 167) expresses as “poet’s commitment [which] entails a zeal for attending, and questioning, and perceiving”.

Poetic performance

The found poem, ‘What’s traditional and non-traditional?’, portrays our deliberations about ‘traditional’ and ‘alternative’ modes of research, while ‘Not just presenting data’ conveys our musings about the possibilities and limitations of poetry as research. ‘Shakespeare??’ re-presents our discovery that, despite our diverse schooling contexts, we all had vivid memories of studying Shakespeare’s plays in English classes. (Kathleen suggested Shakespeare to stimulate discussion about setting as a literary element, and about how particular words and arrangements of words can evoke mood and tone.) ‘Creating usable poems’ conveys our thinking about how we might re-present data in the form of found poems and analyse data through creating haiku poems (brief, three-line poems that follow a pattern of a number of syllables per line).

What's traditional and non-traditional?	Not just presenting data
<p>What do we mean by traditional? Which are traditional methods? We often make assumptions. . .</p> <p>In the traditional way You code Report categories And you move on And on . . .</p> <p>Presenting it In traditional form Wouldn't capture the richness We have to go beyond. . .</p>	<p>Poetry As <i>re</i>-presenting data Also As analysis</p> <p>We want to Participate Shift Open it up Capture Emotion, empathy Embodied understanding</p> <p>Use with caution Never a neutral process Ways in which we re-present Influence meaning</p> <p>Whatever we do We can't get away from <i>Ambiguities</i> <i>Subjectivities</i> <i>Positioning</i></p>

Shakespeare??

Using poetic inquiry
To understand
The concept
Pedagogic settings
Everybody did
Shakespeare
No way you could avoid
Shakespeare . . .
If you remember . . .
Words
Carefully used
This way
Rather than
That word
To create feeling
To create setting
We are talking about
Atmospheric conditions
We are talking about
Environment
It all comes together
In creating a feeling
A mood
It's intangible

Creating usable poems

Answering research questions
Requires creative thought
Create found poems
Use haikus
To respond
Looking at data
As potential poetry
How does that
Create change?
Start to see
Beautiful
Profound
Rather than
"So and so said X"
How do we
Know *what* words?
Be aware of
Bias?
Position?
Playing with words:
This way
What will emerge?
That way
What will emerge?
Text jump out
How can you
Arrange?
Present?
See what emerges
Leave critical self
For the moment
Bring up imaginative self
Engaging
In a different way

Constructing found poems to re-present stories of experience

Research discussion

Having agreed to try poetry to explore the concept of pedagogic settings, we began by observing a photographic collage made by an African international postgraduate student to portray his experiences of campus life. (Not the same student whose collage and interview data we had drawn upon for our previous article.) The student was asked to create a collage of photographs that he had either taken or found to depict significant aspects of his campus life, giving each photograph “a caption ... that [reflected] what [he had] to say about the visual texts” (Mitchell, 2008: 367). In an unstructured interview, he explained his choice of photographs and elaborated on what each meant to him. A postgraduate student research assistant facilitated the collage-making and interview process, because we anticipated that student participants might feel more comfortable sharing their stories of campus life with fellow students. The student researcher was mentored by the project team members.

We decided to try to create a found poem for each of the six photographs, using extracts from the interview transcript to build them and developing titles for the poems based on the photograph captions. We each chose one photograph to work with. The student team member worked together with an academic. The remaining two photographs were set aside for us to work with collectively.

As explained in the previous discussion, we discovered that constructing poetry to re-present data was a non-linear process. We started by highlighting keywords and phrases in the transcript, and then deconstructed and reconstructed the transcript by electronically ‘cutting and pasting’ selected words and phrases together. We experimented with word combinations to create rhythm, pauses and emphasis (Leggo, 2008). This required returning to the photographs and transcript many times in order to create a ‘mental kaleidoscope’ of sights, sounds and silences in the data.

Once we had constructed a first draft of each poem, we projected these and read them aloud. Because poetry has integral auditory and performance dimensions (Leggo, 2008), this helped us ‘hear’ our own poems and interact with others’ responses. We then collectively reshaped the poems to enhance flow, tone and coherence. After finalising the first four poems, we worked together to create poems for the remaining two photographs.

Each of the six found poems is a display of “knowing in the making” (Badley, 2009a: 108), provoked by using poetic inquiry to engage with data. Significantly, we did not know who the student participant was, because as per the confidentiality agreement the collage and transcript were given to us without his real name. Our African international student participants were very concerned about remaining

anonymous. This heightened sense of the need for protection of identity could be linked to anxiety about xenophobia (as discussed in Pithouse-Morgan *et al.*, 2012).

Our only means of connecting with our participant was through his ‘voice’ as conveyed by the photographs, captions and transcript. Constructing and reconstructing the poems engendered a sense of empathetic participation in his lived stories (Eisner, 1997). However, while we felt that we were coming to ‘know’ our participant in a complex way, we also became aware that we were making our own meanings through the found poems, both individually and collectively. We realised how data re-presented as poetry could allow us to communicate an evolving, provisional, polyvocal understanding of a university campus (and of educational experience, more generally) as a pedagogic setting, evoked through interacting poetically with one person’s voice (Van Manen, 1990).

Poetic performance

‘Creating the poems’ offers a polyvocal account of our knowing in the making through collective poetic inquiry. We co-constructed this found poem from individual written reflections and audio-recorded conversations about our poetry-making.

Creating the poems

Collaboratively
Putting things together
Sharing ideas

Spark off each other
Things start to move
On their own momentum

Read and re-read
Immerse
Extract meaning

Live the experiences
Words and pictures entangled
In most unexpected ways

We created the following found poems to re-present different dimensions of what we were coming to know through engaging with our participant’s stories through a poetic inquiry lens: ‘Lecture theatre’, ‘Snakes on campus’, ‘Strikes and violence’, ‘My brother, stabbed to death’, ‘My family’, and ‘I miss my wife’. (Our student participant was working part-time as a contract lecturer and the ‘Lecture theatre’ poem relates particularly to his lecturing experience.)

Using a poetic format allowed us to re-present data in a way that “[did] not aim at closure so much as raising further doubts and questions” (Badley, 2009a: 108).

Snakes on campus

Snakes
Not friendly
I don't even want to see them

Places
You don't like
I don't even want to see them

Run away
Switch it off
I don't even want to see them

A picture
Or life
I become worried
I don't even want to see them

Lecture theatre

I have a fear
About the lecture theatre

I go to the lecture theatre
And it is extreme

It is big
And they are many there

They will be scattered all over
I always perform badly there

A lecture room
Is a nightmare

Stikes and violence

Demonstrations I see in South Africa
I don't normally understand
I don't know why you find people burning, breaking

Breaking and being violent is another thing
I don't like them

It's like a norm since I arrived here in this university
These people are not actually striking for good reason
I don't normally understand

They just look for anything that can make them strike
I don't like them

My brother, stabbed to death

My younger brother was killed here in Durban
Is *this* the one who killed my brother?
We didn't know who killed him for what
Is this the *one* who killed my brother?
It took time to know that actually he was killed
Is this the one who *killed* my brother?
Better if I knew who killed him
Is this the one who killed *my brother*?

My family

My family, actually we are seven
My brother and sisters
Three sisters and three brothers
My brother and sisters
All in all, we are seven
My brother and sisters
Four boys and three girls
My brother and sisters
So I am the sixth in the family
My brother and sisters
There is only one after me
My brother and sisters
Mother and the father have passed away
My brother and sisters
They have gone
My brother and sisters
The middle ones are remaining

I miss my wife

They make me miss my wife
I miss my wife so much
I miss my wife always

There is a space here

I am here alone
My wife alone there
She is alone

There is a space here

Collective poetry-making as analysis

Research discussion

After we had created found poems based on the interview transcript and photographic collage, Daisy and Kathleen explained to the research team how they had recently adapted an activity developed by Samaras (2010) to use haiku poetry-writing in a research workshop with their Masters' students. A participatory process of creating, sharing and responding to haiku poems, written to express research topics, had generated dialogic re-thinking among students and staff, and had evoked new ideas and questions about ways of knowing in educational research (Pillay & Pithouse-Morgan, 2012). Consequently, we decided to experiment with creating a haiku poem to respond to the six found poems we had constructed as data re-presentation.

Haiku poetry is a "structured poetic form" (Lahman *et al.*, 2010: 40) with the following pattern: line 1 – 5 syllables; line 2 – 7 syllables; line 3 – 5 syllables. Samaras (2010) explains that creating haiku poetry can assist researchers with concise expression of ideas. Janesick (2001) demonstrates how she composed haiku poems to reflect on her research learning and knowing.

Using a haiku format to offer a collective understanding was again a complex and iterative process. We spent time viewing and reading out the six poems in order to see and hear recurring narrative patterns and tensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). After a great deal of discussion and some contestation, we reached a negotiated understanding of these patterns and tensions. Together (with one of us as a scribe, in a Word document projected on a screen) we wrote down words and phrases to capture this emerging understanding. We consulted a thesaurus to find alternative words to best reflect our sense-making. We then tried to select and regroup words and phrases to create a coherent interpretation within the structure of a three-line haiku poem.

Using the haiku format for analysis often felt 'messy' and discomforting as we grappled with finding words to "[shape] and [re-shape] our limited knowing and understanding of where we currently [were]" (Badley, 2009b: 218). Significantly, we spent time debating whether to use the word 'ambiguous' in the poem. During this heated discussion, we discovered that 'ambiguous' had different connotations for us – probably because of our diverse theoretical, methodological and linguistic backgrounds. Some of us interpreted 'ambiguous' to mean 'vague' or even 'misleading', while others read it as 'open to more than one interpretation' or 'subject to change'. Recourse to the thesaurus revealed that, indeed, 'ambiguous' could convey all or any of these meanings. This contestation (as with our initial heated conversation about poetry as research) could have led to us dividing into warring factions that refused to engage with "a pluralism of vocabularies" (Smith, 1997: 11). However, perhaps because of our growing trust in each other and our participatory process, we took the time to explain and listen to our diverse understandings and to acknowledge

that each of us was working with a “taken-for-granted” definition (Sparkes, 1991: 103). This critical conversation allowed us to realise that, while we had to come to some agreement about what we regarded as the function of this word in this particular poem, we also had to acknowledge that potential audiences would bring new perspectives. We had to accept that we could not direct how others should make meaning from our poem, and that we could rather look forward to engaging with multiple perspectives as a way of extending our own knowing (Leggo, 2008). In this instance, we recalled Eisner’s (1997: 8) concept of “productive ambiguity”, which we had come across in our preliminary reading on poetry as research (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Reference to Eisner’s thinking helped us to appreciate how “the open texture of the [poetic] form increases the probability that multiple perspectives will emerge [to] make our engagement with the phenomena more complex” (Eisner, 1997: 8).

Poetic performance

The haiku poem ‘Pedagogic settings’ reveals our evolving knowing about the concept of pedagogic settings and about poetry as analysis. In limiting ourselves to the concise haiku format, we had to choose what we believed was most important to express; therefore, the understandings we offer in this instance are necessarily incomplete. In using this particular form, we acknowledge that other modes could offer different insights (Eisner, 1997). However, we are emboldened by Richardson’s (2003: 515) reminder that “when we read or hear poetry, we are continually nudged into recognising that the text has been constructed. But all texts are constructed – prose ones, too”.

Pedagogic settings

Ambiguous space
Scattered dreams and feelings
Moving amidst time

Collective poetic performance as polyvocal inquiry

Research discussion

We had originally planned to engage with several students’ photographic collages and interview transcripts in developing our conference presentation. However, after constructing the six found poems and the haiku poem, we realised that our interaction with only one student’s stories had given us sufficient material for a 30-minute conference presentation. Due to our growing awareness of the performative and polyvocal potential of poetry as research, we deliberated on how to communicate our research knowing in a way that would provoke our audience to participate in our collective poetic inquiry.

We began our presentation by performing the six found poems, without any introduction or prior explanation. We stood in a row at the front of the room, and each of us performed a poem one after the other. As we had anticipated, this surprised the audience and we could see from their faces that it elicited a direct and powerful interaction with the poems.

We then offered a brief overview of our process of developing the found poems to re-present data, and explained how we had used the haiku format as analysis. To end, we read our haiku poem and invited discussion. During the ensuing vigorous and challenging conversation, it became evident that poetic inquiry was, to a large extent, an unfamiliar research genre for this audience of educational researchers (who appeared mostly to be working or studying in South African universities). Some audience members showed great enthusiasm for research as poetry, whereas others (as expected) expressed doubts about its validity.

Because this conversation had prompted us to deepen our thinking, we agreed that, immediately after the conference, each of us would email a page of written reflections on the performance and resultant discussion to the other team members. A month later, we held another writing retreat where we talked through our reflections and viewed a transcript of our audio-recorded conversation with the audience. Our written reflections and the transcript highlighted how the poetic performance had evoked emotional and intellectual engagement among both performers and audience (Lapum, 2008). We decided to portray the reflections and audience discussion in the form of found poems.

Poetic performance

‘Research as performance’ re-presents our collective, multifaceted experience of the conference session. The poem reveals apprehensions about moving away from more familiar and comfortable forms of research presentation to the ‘risky’ mode of poetic performance. It also portrays how the emotionality and intensity of the shared performance experience evoked dynamic, embodied ways of research knowing. ‘Where are we coming from?’ re-presents the complexity of the multiperspective audience response that provoked us to acknowledge the tentativeness of our knowing about or through poetry as research, and also makes public our growing appreciation of the promise of collective poetic inquiry as a participatory educational research methodology.

Research as performance

They saw us standing there
Everyone wanted to know
What's happening here?
What's going to happen?

We were nervous
We didn't know
What's happening here?
What's going to happen?

The poem:
Human experiences
And emotions
Insight into inner life
Personal and intimate

Performing the poem
I felt the 'air' change
The performance moved me
To become one
With the experience
I struggled
Not to become tearful

I was not only one
Listening to the others
Inserting themselves
The poems come alive

The audience connecting
Forgetting who they are
In this entanglement
The poems come alive

Us and them and those merged
Swirled around
Rousing emotion
In the body
And the mind

We all felt different
We connected
Together performing
Audience connecting
Provoked
Jolted
Nobody neutral

Connected
In a new way
We came together
We responded

Where are we coming from?

Whatever the data
You bring analysis to life
You are actually seeing
Getting that feeling
There is a bit of you

It's human experience
In our different worlds
They actually talk to me
Where we are coming from
The human aspect

I have a problem
Not talking me
Reliability?
How will they look at this?
Those in different cultural
setting? How do you measure?
What do you lose?

We should be doing more
We need to go this way
You must invent
You must experiment
Take changes
Break the rules
Have fun

Conceptualising our collective poetic inquiry process as polyvocal

Research discussion

We began our journey of collective poetic inquiry with the intention of exploring the concept of pedagogic settings. While reflecting on the experience of performing our poems at the conference, we realised that our poetic exploration of this concept had been a catalyst for an inquiry that took us in the divergent, unexpected direction of deconstructing and re-constructing our ways of knowing and being as educational researchers. We, individually and collectively, are not the same as when we started. We have changed in how we think about who we are, what we know and how we feel about what we know and do not know.

Looking back, we recognise a shifting that began when we, as researchers and educators whose job it is to know and tell others what we know, ventured into an unsettling space of what Vinz (1997: 139-140, italics in the original) describes as “*un-knowing*” and “*not-knowing*”. Vinz explains “*un-knowing*” as “giving up present understandings (*positions*) ... to make gaps and spaces through which to ... discover a multiplicity of meanings” and “*not-knowing*” as “[acknowledging] ambiguity and uncertainty – dis-positioning from the belief that [researchers and] teachers should know or be able to lead or construct unambiguous journeys toward knowledge”.

Far from constructing an unambiguous journey toward knowledge, our collective poetic inquiry pushed us to the precarious point of confronting and publicly revealing ambiguities in what and how we come to know. Eisner (1997: 8) describes this as a “productive ambiguity” that is generated through arts-based forms of research, in which “the material presented is more evocative than denotative, and in its evocation, it generates insight and invites attention to complexity ... [and results] in less closure”. While another participatory arts-based research methodology might have had similar consequences, our exploration of poetry as research suggests that this literary arts-based medium has particular qualities that facilitate a *polyvocal* engagement with, and immersion in research knowing, un-knowing and not-knowing.

Poetic performance

We co-constructed the poem, ‘Ambiguous space’ to portray our evolving understanding of the polyvocal promise of collective poetic inquiry. This poem is a hybrid of the found poem and haiku poem forms. The six lines are made up of ‘poetic fragments’ from our collection of research poems, which were shaped into a ‘double-layer’ haiku pattern of lines 1 and 2 having 5 syllables, lines 3 and 4 having 7 syllables, and lines 5 and 6 having 5 syllables.

Ambiguous space

Ambiguous space
This entanglement

Scattered dreams and feelings
Live the experiences

Moving amidst time
Us, them and those merge

Concluding thoughts

As educational researchers, we have a critical social responsibility to keep returning to this question: “What difference could this make to learners or students (and their families and communities) and teachers or educators?” Thus we ask why it should

matter to anyone else if we are “expanding our repertoire of being and [knowing]” (Mitchell, 2008: 258). What we have experienced through our process of collective poetic inquiry is that *how* we research shapes and reshapes what we come to know and un-know and how we share that knowing with others. If we genuinely seek to use participatory methodologies to become “partners in knowledge generation and sharing” (Ferreira, 2012: 512) rather than to establish and demonstrate our expertise, then we need to take risks and open ourselves to ways of researching that provoke ongoing, complex, polyvocal conversations.

If we can acknowledge that our understanding is always partial, contingent and subject to change, then we can affirm that we always have something to learn from, and with others in our quest to make a qualitative difference to lived educational experience.

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