**Vanishing Point - or Meeting in the Middle?
Student/Supervisor Transformation in a Self-Study Thesis**

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Abstract

This account explores the divergent perspectives of supervisor and student interacting in self-study research, showing how both participants were transformed by the experience.

Although both supervisor and student had faced similar problems as mature students engaging in doctoral study, and both possessed strong convictions about their chosen paths, their focus was very different. The student, being visually creative, was investigating the value of integrated arts as a transformational learning medium; the supervisor, from a linguistics background, was focused on exploring the nature of written communication. The supervisor/student relationship comprises a complex nexus of interconnections between persons, material objects, times and places: it is never static, but always emerging, with the relationship often ending up being more collegial than at first, as with the authors of this paper. In the counterpoint dialogue presented by student and supervisor, it can be seen that both learned from each other: the student, the rigours of structuring a passionate argument intellectually; the supervisor, to express an intellectual argument more personally. Both authors were transformed by the supervisor/student interaction: the supervisor, in re-discovering the value of interpersonal communication; the student, in mastering a research

approach which did justice to her belief in the creative power of the arts. The value of engaging with perspectives which initially appear to be irreconcilable is not just to 'learn new things', but to push the inner limits of our perspectives, transforming not only the ways in which we perceive things, but the ways in which we learn.

Key words: self-study, autoethnography, living theory, supervision, perspectives, transformation

Introduction

While self-study and autoethnography studies started appearing around the 1990s (Griffiths & Williamson, 2009; Pinnegar, 1998; Reed-Danahay, 1997), these did not come into vogue as genres for doctoral research locally (i.e. in KwaZulu Natal) until fairly recently (for example, Grossi, 2006; Pithouse, 2007). As a result, many supervisors might have been aware of these approaches but would have had little or no experience in supervising such studies. This was the case in 2008-2009 at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in the Department of Media, Language and Communication, when numbers of mature students, many of them educators, registered in the Language Practice degree in response to the incentive awards offered to postgraduate students during that period. These students had a rich life experience of pedagogical practice, which made autoethnography, self-study or a combination of both highly suitable approaches. After preliminary discussions with students and a few months of preliminary reading, the supervisor in this case (co-author Dee Pratt) recognised that at least two of her doctoral students had the potential - and disposition - for a self-study or autoethnography, although the only exemplar she could offer at this stage was Grossi's (2006) thesis. One student was engaged in a language-focused self-study (Soni,

2012); the other (co-author Beth Peat), unlike the supervisor, had a Fine Arts background and her focus was predominantly visual and performance-based. In this account we show how it was possible for convergence to occur between two very different research foci and personality types, and that the tension between our divergent views became creative, rather than dissonant, illustrating the value of pushing the limits of one's perspective in learning new ways of seeing. Both authors emerged from the experience transformed, in that the supervisor re-discovered the personal approach which had become submerged under her academic persona, while the student mastered a scholarly genre which celebrated the creative power of the arts.

The student's challenge: finding a suitable theoretical framework

I was a single working mother with a young son attempting a master's nearly thirty years after completing a Bachelor of Education Degree. As I lacked confidence and time I selected a part time master's with coursework and a minor dissertation. I thought this would allow me to develop the necessary background theoretical knowledge and academic skills at a manageable pace. Due to family dramas, however, it took me seven years to complete what should have been a four years degree. With an inability to find a suitable theoretical structure I found myself floundering at a fundamental level, rewriting my original proposal and restructuring my research. Furthermore my creative and development work with educators was not of a sensitive nature and I found the ethical clearance process unnecessarily restrictive. To compound the stressful situation at the time I was finally ready to submit my dissertation, the chosen (and suitable) external examiner had unexpectedly died and a different one had to be speedily located. Whilst my internal examiner was supportive, my newly chosen external examiner criticized my work for being weak in terms

of its lack of a sound theoretical structure. I was further traumatized by having to complete and document in one week a long list of editorial and structural changes to my final thesis before I could graduate.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that I approached the compiling of a doctorate with great trepidation. I spent a year reading copiously, and wading through a thickly compiled file of possible theoretical frameworks. My supervisor and I were both getting frustrated, and seemed to be on different pages academically, or like ships passing in the night. At this point my supervisor serendipitously realised that my work and research stance were compatible with the fairly recently established academic field of self-study and we were finally able to meet in the middle. It was with a great sense of relief that I could write my doctoral proposal with the confidence of knowing that I had located myself in the most suitable paradigm for both my own nature and that of the research study. A challenge presented itself again when the proposal was sent to the committee, and I had to further enhance the language orientation of my investigation into creative developmental work in the arts.

The following sections illustrate how self-study methodology was able to resonate so effectively with my research fascination; the language-empowering transformational potential of the arts in education.

The supervisor's challenge: matching orientation with student

Even though my specialist field is written composition, it was only when I started co-authoring with Beth that I realised how comfortable I had become with writing from a critical realist position on computer mediated composition or e-learning, and how inept - and exposed - I felt writing (or attempting to write) in a self-study genre. As counterpoint to Beth's opening section, let me briefly sketch the background to my own situation when she approached me for supervision in 2009. I had just passed my doctorate (DTech in Language Practice) after 15 years of struggling against formidable odds to make a case which to me seemed the 'best explanation' (Franck, 2002) of composing processes. By the time I had graduated in 2008 I had been registered (or had awaited registration) in four universities and had 'gone through' nine supervisors. I had also gone through a highly disturbing process of paradigm shift, moving from liberal humanism to critical language theory, with a short backsliding into positivism before arriving triumphantly (as I then thought) at social constructivism (I was wrong: my orientation was critical realist). At a Supervisor's Workshop I attended in 2009, the facilitator commented that the best doctoral supervisors were those who had 'suffered' while completing their own research, and I certainly met that criterion, with the resultant stress culminating in two life-threatening diseases. My promotion to Associate Professor was delayed, and my final salary before retirement was consequently low, resulting in a lower pension payout.

On the plus side, I had come to terms with myself and my beliefs and values: I did not *care* if my work was largely rejected and misunderstood by the clique which at that time dominated the field of written composition. What I finally wrote in my thesis was true to my 40 years' teaching, lecturing and research practice, and was supported by writers and

practitioners there in the front lines working practically to improve writing with actual groups of (often disadvantaged) learners. It was also true to my real orientation, Bhaskar's critical realism. Let me point out that I may change both my conclusions on written composition and my orientation: development requires us to move on, and, as both Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer point out, we cannot say in advance in which direction our theories are developing and what they may become (Archer, 2007; Bhaskar, 1998, p. 186). The point is to be true to yourself at whatever stage you are at - what Bhaskar terms 'developmental consistency' - and I learned to trust my own instincts and become an autonomous researcher, valuing, but not depending on other expert opinions.

I was by then ready to take on doctoral supervision, and had come to a decision about certain key principles:

- Supervision should work towards fostering the development of *autonomous* researchers (i.e. I was not going to 'lead' my students' research, or make them feel that they had to adopt my own - or any other - orientation - or topic - before I would act as supervisor.
- The corollary is that the supervisor should be the expert in the research *process*, but the student should be - or become - the expert in the specific research *area* chosen for study.
- I was going to forestall and prevent (where possible) *unnecessary* suffering.

By the latter, I meant largely the administrative horrors which universities (including my own) inflict on hapless students, but also the political knife-play which can shred students' prospects. For example, one of my doctoral students whose thesis was passed 'as is' by an overseas examiner, had 'Not doctoral material' scrawled in pencil across his proposal by an in-house reviewer. From my own experience it was clear to me that mature practitioners

had much to offer to the body of research in terms of professional knowledge, and often had very strong convictions about the value of what they were doing, but tended to lack specialist knowledge of research procedures and conventions. To complicate matters, most of my doctoral students were coming to the DTech in Language Practice without specialist linguistic qualifications, as we were at the time (2008-2009) opening up the Language Practice masters and doctorate to a wider conceptualization of 'language', that is, as different modes of communication (including hypermedia and multimedia communication). Beth's chosen research project was a case in point: she was focusing on her own practice (at Ikhwezi In-Service Training Institute) of assisting teachers to communicate complex concepts by using the arts – drama, poetry, dance, song – rather than through the medium of language alone. I must admit that I initially despaired of assisting her to find the 'right' (for her) orientation, but as it had been the central problem in my own research, I was not about to give up.

The student's overview of narrative self-study as research orientation

A narrative self-study research inquiry of the type I undertook is, by its very nature, deeply personal and reflexive and thus primarily qualitative in its orientation. The highly interactive and participatory data producing mechanisms are therefore geared towards discovering the grounded reality, richness and authenticity of particular contexts or case studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Woods, 1979). As a study of developmental work related to the implementation of the National Curriculum Statements Arts and Culture Learning Area, the research was located, as is the theoretical leaning of the NCS, in the postmodern and critical paradigms, as both are multifaceted, eclectic and complex, whilst also being emancipatory, critical of the status quo, supporting of diversity and presenting

knowledge as interrelated, relative and dynamic (Frame, 2003; Ornstein & Behar-Horenstein, 1999).

The action research basis of the type of self-study I attempted also places it most convincingly in the 'paradigm of praxis' where it 'shares a number of perspectives (and methodological processes) with the interpretive paradigm' and is in direct opposition to the positivist paradigm. Praxis as used by Aristotle is 'the art of acting upon conditions one faces in order to change them'. It is a paradigm that maintains the foundation of knowledge springs from practice, and that knowledge conversely informs practice. The researcher's position is never neutral and he/she should have (as I do) a vital investment in the research process and findings (O'Brien, 1998, p. 7).

The supervisor's 'take' on the student's orientation

I had another doctoral student (Soni, 2012) for whom I had identified Grossi's (2006) autoethnography as a suitable starting point, but it was only when this student started querying the difference between autoethnography and self-study that I became aware the latter was a research orientation. I found Jack Whitehead's action research website (www.actionresearch.net) very useful in directing students to online publications and action research/ 'living theory' theses. Does it matter that I do not personally adopt - or necessarily agree with - the orientation of the student? Not at all, because I can then ask the student: 'Why should we believe that?', 'What is of value in that position?' and 'How does that fit with your personal beliefs and research intention?' Having myself wavered between many conflicting positions, I am not in a position to point a finger. What I learned when I produced my completed thesis (and the book based on it), is that there is something

of value to be found in all research positions, and that it buttresses your own conclusions more firmly when you can cite consonances or agreement over diverse positions. While Beth and I are very different personalities, there were commonalities in our experience, which, I think, helped us to work together in spite of the frustrations she mentions earlier. We both:

- came to our doctoral studies as mature students;
- were initially at odds with received opinions;
- had strong beliefs about the efficacy of our educational practices;
- had traumatic experiences which undermined our confidence in our academic ability;
- could not initially identify a research orientation which fitted our beliefs and values.

When I read what Beth wrote (in the above section), I am filled with pride for her. It is not a question of whether she is 'right' or not, it is the authority with which she writes, her use of evidence to support her statements, her use of research conventions, and, above all, her absolute *control* over what she is doing, while still maintaining a flow in the writing. I am not an expert in the field of self-study, but Beth is a perfectionist, so I trusted her instincts, and she has now moved into a position of autonomy and authority. In areas where I was unable to mentor her, Beth used the writings of Joan Walton and Marian Naidoo for affirmation of the direction her research was taking. It is a key point in supervision that students must *read* extensively, and Beth's experience bears this out. Initially I often sit and 'google' with my new students, modelling reading searches for them. In the latter stages of research, my students are often googling for *me*, sending me readings in which they know I will be interested, or sharing their *EndNote* libraries with me as I shared mine with them. This

means I am constantly upgraded with new publications and refreshed with new ideas. In September 2012 I invited Joan Walton and Marian Naidoo (Beth's Examiners) to DUT to run self-study seminars and workshops, and had the privilege of a few intense interactions with them and groups they facilitated, refreshing my belief that interpersonal communication (whether oral or written) is the key not only to learning, but also to research.

How the student used narrative self-study methodology in an arts-based inquiry

Whilst the first strand of my self-study thesis discovered that integrated arts can provide a medium of communication which could transcend language and cultural barriers, the second strand showed how the use of narrative self-study clearly articulated the insights derived from an integrated arts approach (see Peat, 2012).

Naidoo (2005), in relation to her reflective self-study research projects in British health and social care, states that it has only recently been recognised that the arts have transformational potential to bring about desirable social change as opposed to the authoritarian practices of the past. I find that this notion, strengthened by her compassionate orientation, reverberates with the insights and feelings I have been developing as a practitioner of the arts in education, and considered this relatively new wave of international acceptance of the power of the arts and creativity very encouraging.

Self-study, as a rigorous and acceptably scholarly approach to social science research, has been steadily gaining ground through the work of numerous authors. One of these is Jack Whitehead, who explains what he calls his 'living theory methodology' as a means to improve practice by expressing the 'life-affirming energy of individuals, cultures and the

cosmos, with values and understandings that it is claimed carry hope for the future of humanity' (Whitehead, 2009c, p. 1). Affirming Le Grange's (2005) insight, Whitehead (2009b, p. 15) states that 'the authenticity of research work depends crucially on the use of reflexivity: both personal and epistemic/disciplinary reflexivity'.

Whitehead (2009c) and McNiff (2002) are concerned with creating educational theories that embrace the concept of inclusion, much like the African philosophy of 'Ubuntu' or of individuals existing as an integral part the web of humanity and not in dualistic isolation (Tutu, 1999). Whitehead (2009c, p. 113) cites Rayner (2004) and Lumley (2008), who support the idea of humans having shared or 'pooled' consciousness. It is no coincidence that this concept aligns strongly with advanced quantum physics findings that all aspects of life on earth and the universe are connected at a profoundly sub-atomic level (Bohm, 2002). Braden (2007) states this more emphatically when he gives the following advice as one of his keys to conscious creation:

To tap into the force of the universe itself, we must see ourselves as part of the world rather than separate from it (p. 208).

It is my experience that it is through this connectivity we achieve the energy flow that lends dynamism and resonance to the teaching and learning context; a concept philosophically related to Ken Wilber's Integral Theory (Forman, 2010). Of primary but nevertheless equivocal value is the creation of enhanced and co-constructed meaning, or what Levi-Strauss (1966) called our 'semantic universe' or word-built world.

McNiff (2002) alludes to the quantum physics phenomenon of entanglement by saying:

My own view is that we live in a deeply unified universe, where all things are connected, often in very distant ways, but their effects are evident in the lives of everyone - the 'butterfly effect', where the beat of a butterfly's wings locally can have repercussions in far-flung global terms. For me open-ended systems have the potential to transform themselves into richer versions of themselves and humans, and human interactions, by the fact that they are living, are open systems (pp. 2-3).

As a consequence of the limited scientific and religious cultural assumptions which inform our outdated approaches to education (Peat, 2012, p. 39), we have not yet assimilated and adjusted to the revolutionary findings of Quantum Physics. Walton (2008) conjectures:

My growing conviction was that we self-limit our potential, due to the fact that we have internalized a world view which tells us that we are primarily material beings, and that as such, we are limited by laws that determine what is possible in the universe (p. 71).

I have found this to be true for myself earlier on my life. It is also true for my trainee educators, who at first thought they were not capable of implementing the curriculum, and were then astounded when they discovered, through the liberating, creative and transformative pedagogical approach of integrated Arts, that they seemed to tap into a new energy source that helped them to realise their potential more fully. They discovered that both they and their learners were capable of far more than they had thought they were able.

Whitehead (2009a, pp. 187-188) refers to self-study research methodology as 'being grounded in the relational dynamics of everyday life' and explaining 'the receptively responsive educational influences of individuals in their own lives' that are unique. He claims furthermore that the use of printed text as a dominant form communicative media to explore the field of educational practice 'cannot express adequately ...the embodied values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives' (Whitehead, 2009c, p. 113). Hence he combines video with text in multimedia presentations to more fully embrace and communicate the valued and positive concepts of academic freedom, love, pleasure, humour and justice. In these practices he is inspired by the post-symbolist poet Valery, cited in Said (1997, p. 15), who fused words with visual arts, music and dance out of 'an aversion to the base currency of words'. In an African context Whitehead (2009b, p. 18) cites Conolly (2002) as saying that 'the gestural-visual/oral-aural mode is more immediate and spontaneous than the literate mode'.

I made extensive use of current technology in my teaching and in my doctoral research in the form of photographs of visual art work and digital video footage of learners' arts integrated performances as well as researcher, participant and learner reflections to capture the rich nuances of our lived experiences. I used multimedia in a way similar to Whitehead (2009c) as it seemed to reflect ideally the spirit with which I felt I could meaningfully study the degree and nature of transformation that was occurring in myself and my educator participants as a result of our integrated arts practices.

I am surprised and comforted to discover that self-study in education began to develop early in 1990 and has been gathering the respect, support and recognition of the

international academic community with a large body of literature and research following through movements such as the Special Interest Group (SIG) situated within the American Educational Research Association (AERA) founded in 1992 (see also Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Pithouse, 2007; Zeichner, 2007). Worldwide interest has resulted in edited book-length collections such as those by Farr Darling, Ericksen and Clarke (2007), Kosnik, Beck, Freese and Samaras (2005), Aubusson and Schuck (2008), Crowe (2010) and Tidwell, Heston and Fitzgerald (2009). These and similar international handbooks and peer-reviewed journals have reflected the broad spectrum of issues pertaining to educational self-study.

A narrative self-study research methodology possesses the tantalising and unique potential to simultaneously inform and transform both the individual researchers and their political and social contexts (Brown, 2007; Mitchell, Weber & O'Reily Scanlon, 2005). A number of authors (see Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Van Manen, 1990) describe how narrative self-study is an appropriate means to construct meanings and interpretations of a teacher's experiences and give valuable guidance for conducting research.

Furthermore, literature appropriate to the multicultural nature of this research reflects the suitability of self-study methodology to build professional knowledge bases for teachers that promote the sort of transformative reform my study monitors, whilst being sensitive to the humanistic issues of social class (Allender, 2007; Brown, 2007; Korthagen & Lunenberg, 2007; Schulte, 2009).

Self-study research in the Arts in education has not been as extensive as one might expect. As Mitchell, Weber and Pithouse (2009) say 'the use of visual approaches to self-study can literally help us see things differently', and:

The strength of visual methods lies in harnessing the power of images to bring things to light in both personal and public and to offer multiple theoretical and practical perspectives on issues of social import. Using images connects to self, yet distances us from ourselves. When done with a critical gaze, self-study facilitates professional growth in ways that not only end up changing oneself, but also serve as an impetus for tackling the wider social problems that contextualize our individual lives (p. 119).

My action research self-study with educators certainly bore this out. I could not find any self-study projects that focused exclusively on integrated arts. In most cases aspects related to the arts such as drama, drawing, photography or collage were adopted as an integral and essential part of the study (Griffiths et al, 2009; Hamilton & Pinegar, 2009; Mitchell et al, 2009; Naidoo, 2005; Tidwell & Manke, 2009).

Locally the interest in memory work, reflexivity and narrative self-study research has resulted in interest groups developing and a growing body of fascinating and insightful literature, particularly Mitchell, Weber, O'Reilly-Scanlon (2005), and Pithouse, Mitchell and Moletsane (2009), which has proved to be a veritable treasure chest to justify and celebrate the value of this form of inquiry in understanding and improving practice.

My ongoing developmental work with educators representative of our 'rainbow nation' ideally lends itself to a self-study process, one in which we can question and collaboratively negotiate our understanding of meaningful quality through their reflexive narratives and dialogue (Bodone, Guojonsdottir & Dalmau, 2007; Brandenburg, 2008; McNiff, 2002). The process was intended to generate the sort of rich data which researchers such as Pithouse et al (2009), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), McNiff, (2002) and Lincoln and Guba, (1989), amongst others, have frequently alluded to. Such data offers practitioners in this and other related fields valuable insight into the grounded reality, transformative potential, and trials and triumphs of the practice of integrated art in the classrooms of ex-Department of Education and Training (DET) rural and township schools.

The supervisor's points of contact with concepts of narrative self-study

While Beth and I have different orientations and our focus is on different media (hers is visual, mine verbal), there are numerous points of contact between the position she adopted in her research and my own position, which I shall illustrate with reference to the section above. She talks of arts as providing a 'medium of communication which could transcend language and cultural barriers'. According to Bhaskar, 'our interactions with each other have many dimensions which are non-linguistic' (in Norris, 1999, p. 8). I have always grounded interactions in my language teaching in nonverbal elements (e.g. enacted scenarios which involve images and movement), and I emphasise to my students the ways in which nonverbal elements communicate (layout, graphics, even the way the text sits on the page). Beth also mentions that 'arts have transformational potential to bring about desirable social change', and critical realism emphasises the use of praxis to transform society (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 169). Beth refers to reflexivity, which is a key element in critical

realism (M. S. Archer, 2010). She mentions the dynamism and interconnectedness of the universe, which has resonances with the realist view of reality as being essentially dynamic and comprising of complex interlocking systems (Bhaskar, 2008, p. xiii). But I would have problems with references to a 'semantic universe' or 'word-built world', as this would fit within Bhaskar's 'domain of empirical' only, and to identify this with reality overall would be what realists term the 'epistemic fallacy' (i.e. conflating epistemology with ontology, Bhaskar, 2008, p. xvi). Her focus on multimedia is reflected in the way I use digital multimedia in my online courses, and in the way my other students (some of whom have adopted a critical realist approach) are using them. Finally, when Beth mentions self-study in terms of building 'professional knowledge bases for teachers', my own writings, even if they were not formally identified as 'self-study' works, all contain an element of reflective self-study in tracing the life experiences which contributed to the teaching and research practices documented, and - for me - served as '*an impetus for tackling the wider social problems*' which contextualised my own life.

Conclusion

The supervisor/student relationship comprises a complex nexus of interconnections between persons, material objects, times and places: it is never static, but always emerging, with the relationship often ending up being more collegial than it was at first, as with the authors of this paper. We have both learned from each other: the student, the rigours of structuring a passionate argument intellectually; and the supervisor, to express her intellectual argument more personally. In the process, both of us had to 'meet in the middle', with the 'vanishing point' being the start of new perspectives opening up. In discussing the visual illusion inherent in the vanishing point from a philosophical

perspective, Sorenson makes the point that the vanishing point is at the edge of the viewer's visual field and therefore cannot be seen clearly: 'The vanishing point is an *inner* limit' (Sorensen, 2007, pp. 435, authors' emphasis). It is then essentially a point of reference, not a material entity, and the point of reference moves as the viewer's perspective develops. The value of engaging with research perspectives which initially appear to be irreconcilable is not just to 'learn new things', but to push the inner limits of one's perspective, that is to learn new ways of seeing. We also, then, see new ways of learning, which progressively changes not only what we learn, but *how* we learn, and this is the most significant transformation of all.

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