

# Envisaging New Ways of Knowing for Social Change

## Poetic Learning Inspired by Staging a Readers' Theatre Script

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Arts-based Research

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Poetic Analysis

Performance

Readers' Theatre

We, three teacher educators from a research-intensive South African university, have been immersed in collaborative arts-inspired self-study research (Samaras, 2010) for more than a decade. Linda is in Mathematics Education, Lungile in Gender and Curriculum Studies, and Kathleen in Teacher Development Studies. Through our self-study research explorations, we have encountered “many and diverse ways of knowing—personal, narrative, embodied, artistic, aesthetic—that stand outside sanctioned intellectual frameworks” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 55). To illustrate, we have explored collage, dialogue, drawing, letter writing, poetry, scrapbooking, storyboarding, and storytelling as literary and visual arts-inspired self-study methods (see Masinga, 2012; Masinga et al., 2016; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2015; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015; Van Laren et al., 2014; Van Laren et al., 2016). And we have experienced first-hand how making use of arts-inspired processes and forms can bring “color, texture, and life” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 58) into self-study research—in ways that generate new modes of knowing to facilitate personal and professional growth.

Experimenting collaboratively with elements of the arts gives us a sense of creative accomplishment. Also, as South African teacher educator researchers, we share a strong sense of social responsibility. We believe that “expanding [our] repertoire of being and doing” through arts-inspired modes can contribute meaningfully to the practice “of research as effecting social change” (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 366-367). Moreover, in sharing our arts-inspired work through multiple presentations and publications, we have witnessed a “ripple effect” that “engages a wider public and either solicits or elicits reaction” from others (Weber, 2014, p. 12). Reflecting on our collaborative arts-inspired self-study, we see how this work can “support the possibilities for looking inward while at the same time drawing attention to the ways that the social context of audiences, exhibitions, and screenings serve as platforms for change in relation to social justice issues” (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 709). Much of this self-study research has focused on HIV and AIDS curriculum integration in higher education (Van Laren et al., 2019; Van Laren et al., 2016; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2015). For us, taking up issues related to HIV and AIDS in and through higher education institutions in South Africa—particularly concerning teacher education—is a critical matter of social change and social justice. South Africa has the “biggest HIV epidemic in the world, with 7.1 million people living with HIV” (AVERT, 2019, p. 1). We live in a country with an HIV prevalence rate of approximately 1 in 5 people (ages 15 – 49) (AVERT, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, it was estimated that by 2017 there were over two million children orphaned because of the epidemic (AVERT, 2019).

We concur with Frizelle (2019), who recently drew attention to a need to create opportunities for all stakeholders in higher education to rethink and improve teaching and learning concerning HIV and AIDS. In the past, extensive large-scale research and interventions focused on changing perceptions, because, “HIV and AIDS were considered to be the outcome of risky individual behaviour” (Frizelle, 2019, p. 46). However, contemporary research that embraces a more

social, organic approach to addressing the epidemic acknowledges the importance of opportunities to engage in dialogical and self-reflexive teaching and learning (Mitchell et al., 2020). We are mindful that the interplay of social factors in South Africa related to gender, race, and class inequalities presents additional complexities for HIV and AIDS-related education and research (Frizelle, 2019). We have found that using dialogical strategies allows students, academics, and educators “to consider how they could, through their future professional practices” (Frizelle, 2019, pp. 46-47) confront these pervasive issues of social injustice. Hence, we explore creative and participatory ways of initiating and sustaining open conversations about HIV and AIDS in the interests of social justice and social change.

Recently, to learn from our experiences as facilitators of an HIV and AIDS education workshop at a local university of technology, we made our first foray into readers’ theatre (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). As a performance arts-inspired research method, readers’ theatre involves two main phases (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). The first phase involves researchers creating a dramatic script from edited extracts of a research data transcript. The second phase involves staging the script for an audience.

Elsewhere (Van Laren et al., 2019), we presented an in-depth examination of the first phase of our readers’ theatre adventure: our process of creating a readers’ theatre script. We described the process as follows:

*We began our readers’ theatre process by sitting together to watch a video of the workshop that had been recorded by a student assistant at the university of technology. We focused on the object icebreaker activity [where we examined everyday objects to explore the concept of “entanglements” (Mitchell, 2017, p. 11) of HIV and AIDS in our lives as South Africans who teach and learn in higher education]. We watched this part of the video repeatedly to see what we could use as a basis for our script. After sharing and reflecting on our individual responses to what each workshop participant had said about her or his object, and considering connections across what various participants had said, we agreed to choose three participants<sup>1</sup> as the main characters for the script...*

*We then transcribed what [the three participants] had said about their objects. Next, we met together again to read, edit, and rearrange extracts from the transcript to create a succinct script. In editing and rearranging text, we paid attention to enhancing the flow, coherence, and impact of the script (Van Laren et al., 2019, pp. 226-228)*

The outcome of that creative process was the script, which we titled “Containing HIV and AIDS”. We added a narrator’s voice to describe the action. Here, to illustrate, we share the opening part of the script:

*Narrator: “Lungile turns to Crispin.”*

*[Lungile]: “Crispin, what’s your object?”*

*Narrator: “Crispin holds up an empty, translucent plastic bag.”*

*Crispin: “What struck me was that when I put the bag down here on the desk, it sort of heaved up and down.”*

*Narrator: “Crispin gently shakes the bag open and lays it out on the desk.”*

*Narrator: “Crispin pauses to watch the bag. He then gestures with both hands to the bag, which has started moving slightly up and down in the current of the air-conditioning.”*

*Crispin: “But, you know, I am thinking about breath, people’s breath. And, being in a group of students talking about the impact of HIV in families in particular, because although we didn’t ask them to talk about their families, that’s actually what they spoke about.”*

*Narrator: “Crispin pauses and watches the bag moving softly.”*

*Crispin: "And, I think, everyone must have been, everyone's breath must have been caught in this. You know, the things that interfere with breathing, anxiety, fear - whatever makes people breathe out of rhythm." (Van Laren et al., 2019, pp. 229-230, italics added)*

After publishing the readers' theatre script as part of a research article (Van Laren et al., 2019), we embarked on the second phase by asking five fellow teacher educators to read the script on our behalf at a South African national education conference. Several months before the conference, we communicated with these prospective readers via email to invite them to read for us and to provide details of what we aimed for through staging our script. We also shared the script with our potential readers. They all willingly agreed to read the script.

## Aims

The staging of our script served as part of our continuing journey of learning and working creatively to gain and facilitate new ways of knowing as teacher educators committed to social change and social justice. As Mitchell et al. (2020) highlighted, the arts "can be used by teachers and teacher educators both for seeing and making visible key issues and for providing important platforms for reflexive engagement" (p. 2). In staging the script, we were keen to observe what key issues would become visible and how reflexive engagement might ensue. Hence, in this paper, we focus on the second phase of our exploration of readers' theatre as a research method. We ask, *"What can we learn about envisaging new ways of knowing for social change through staging a readers' theatre script?"* In what follows, we elaborate on our methods and demonstrate how we undertook poetic analysis to facilitate and communicate our learning from staging the script. We present the three poems that we created and offer our collective interpretation of each. To close, we consider implications for our further learning and for others.

## Methods

### *Self-Study Method*

Our self-study method was influenced by a rich history of shared methodological creativity in the international self-study community, in which researchers have worked together to invent new ways of knowing, bringing into play a multiplicity of arts-inspired forms and processes (Galman, 2009; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020; Weber & Mitchell, 2004). In particular, our staging of a readers' theatre script as an arts-inspired self-study method draws on the collaborative scriptwriting and performances of researchers such as Mitchell and Weber (2000), Weber and Mitchell (2002), and Meskin et al. (2017).

### *Participants*

As self-study researchers, we were the primary set of participants. Our second set of participants comprised the five teacher educators who were our script readers. These teacher educators are all members of our local self-study research group and are well versed in arts-inspired self-study methods. One of the five is a Creative Arts teacher educator with a professional background in Drama and Performance. The others are in Accounting Education, Early Childhood Education, Educational Leadership, and Teacher Development Studies.

The secondary set of participants comprised the conference presentation audience, which was a group of approximately 30 academics and graduate students from diverse South African universities and academic disciplines. Some of the audience members were teacher educators. All were involved in educational research. Before we began the conference presentation, we obtained verbal consent from the five readers and the audience to record the presentation and audience engagement. We also invited audience members to provide their names and contact details for any follow-up.

## Data Sources

Our first data source was generated through audio recording the 30-minute presentation that we gave at the conference held in late 2018. Our presentation was titled *"Containing HIV/AIDS: Composing a readers' theatre script for relevant and authentic professional learning in higher education"*. The recording captured our introduction to the conference presentation, the script reading, and the audience discussion.

Our planning for the staging of the script was guided by an understanding that readers' theatre involves a minimally staged presentation without props and theatrical lighting, "the performers hold scripts, and any acting out of a piece is limited" (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, p. 406). As a consequence of the simple staging, "the audience ... is invited to create meaning from what is suggested [by the words and the expression] rather than from what is literally shown" (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, p. 406).

Because we did not want to impose too much on their time and because we had confidence in them as readers, we did not ask the five readers to meet with us before the conference presentation to rehearse the script. We provided the script well in advance, but did not give them any instructions on script reading or performance.

During the staging of the script, we observed that the readers had spent time preparing, as they managed to communicate confidently and clearly to facilitate audience understanding. The reading of the script was fluent with no awkward silences as the five readers transitioned from one reader to the next. They successfully managed to pick up cues from the script and each other.

To facilitate discussion after the script reading, we asked the audience and script readers to consider the questions, *"What does the script say?" "And is this worth saying?" "Why?"* This resulted in a reflective conversation between the audience, the script readers, and us—reflecting not only on what the script was saying but also on the process of creating and using a readers' theatre script in educational research.

After the conference, we transcribed the audio recording of the 30-minute conference presentation. Then, in early 2019, as part of our self-study research process, we (Linda, Lungile, and Kathleen) met for a reflective conversation based on the conference presentation audio recording. To facilitate this process, we replayed the recording with the clear intention of purposively listening and discussing not only what we had said, but also what the audience members and readers had contributed.

Our reflective conversation elicited by listening to the recording gave us opportunities for consideration and reconsideration of the meanings we made from what we said and heard at the conference (Strong et al., 2015). We listened to and commented on how the script reading unfolded and how the audience and readers responded. The transcription of our conversation became another data source.

Also, we engaged our script readers to elicit how each of them experienced reading the script for the conference audience. We invited each reader individually to send us a smartphone voice note in response to the prompt, *"How did you feel about participating in a readers' theatre script presentation?"* We tried to keep the prompt open enough so that each reader could reflect on whatever feelings or aspects they wished. Because the readers are busy teacher educators based at two different universities in two cities, we anticipated that sending a voice note at their convenience would be comparatively easy to fit into their packed schedules. The readers willingly sent and allowed us to use their voice notes. We transcribed their voice notes, and this transcription became a further data source.

## Trustworthiness

In this paper, we attend to trustworthiness by explicating our data sources and data analysis and showing how our educational understanding grew organically through the study (Feldman, 2003). Furthermore, in our self-study we addressed trustworthiness through consistent, collaborative reflection and face-to-face dialogue to gain new knowledge by generating "local, situated, provisional knowledge of teaching" (LaBoskey, 2004b, p. 1170) that could inspire us, and other teacher educators, to consider, explore and rethink practices to envisage new ways of knowing for social change.

Our reflective moments occurred at different stages of our journey, such as the face-to-face dialogue with the audience and the voice notes of the readers. These different layers of engagements provided opportunities for growing our understanding.

## *Data Analysis*

We engaged in poetic analysis (Butler-Kisber et al., 2002-2003) of our data sources by creating found poems (Butler-Kisber, 2002) composed of words and phrases from the transcripts of the audio recordings and voice notes. After considering various options, we chose the blank verse poetic form, which is customarily used in scriptwriting for dramatic performances (Literary Devices, 2019). Blank verse has “no fixed number of lines”, but “has a consistent [beat] with 10 syllables in each line where unstressed syllables are followed by stressed ones, five of which are stressed but do not rhyme” (Literary devices, 2019, p.1).

Through reading and re-reading the three transcripts collaboratively, we highlighted noteworthy words and phrases, and used these as material to create three poems. With discussion about which words and phrases to bring in and how to assemble them, we composed three blank verse poems. The collective, dialogic process of creating these simple poems in blank verse form allowed us to see patterns and make connections (Butler-Kisber et al., 2002-2003).

## **Outcomes**

We created a sequence of blank verse poems, “A Catalytic Container”, “A Script as a Self-Study Method”, and “Connecting in Performance”, which offered us “expressive opportunities” (Shaw, 2007, p. 4) to articulate our new learning.

### *A Catalytic Container*

*A container, taken to any class*  
*Simple activity, easy to use*  
*Accessible, provocative resource*  
*Teachers reflect through open discussion*  
*Learning with others in new directions*  
*Making connections through conversations*  
*A far-reaching effect in safe spaces*

Our first poem, “A Catalytic Container”, was developed from the transcript of the audio recording of the discussion with the readers and audience during the conference presentation (our initial data source). The audience members and readers, through their engagement and responses to the staging of the script, actively participated in the discussion and provided us with valuable feedback and insights. For example, on a practical level, one of the audience members indicated that the readers’ theatre script itself could serve as a useful pedagogical tool or “*container*” that could easily be used in diverse teaching and learning contexts.

Furthermore, audience members and readers discussed how the use of the script as a pedagogical tool could serve as an informal, evocative means of opening up conversations on sensitive and complex issues related to HIV and AIDS. Audience members and readers highlighted how conversations sparked by the script staging enabled “dialogic reflections” (Rashid, 2018, p.111) in a safe space that allowed for open interchange and expressive exchanges (Mae et al., 2013). In re-reading the transcript, we observed how the audience members and readers responded to the staging of the script based on how they made connections to their thoughts and reflections in what they identified as a safe academic space. This extended our previous learning about how the thoughtful use of arts-inspired approaches can cultivate “contained spaces for beneficial participation in ... dealing with potentially sensitive issues, such as HIV and AIDS” (Van Laren et al., 2019, p. 234). In this sense, “*a catalytic container*” can refer to arts-inspired teaching and learning that prompts feelings and thoughts, which can be shared in an emotionally safe way (Dale & James, 2015), with a possible “*far-reaching effect*” on pressing issues of social justice and social change.

## *A Script as Self-Study Method*

*To speak up, communicate fluently  
With confidence, no awkward silences  
Picking up cues from audience faces  
Spontaneous, authentic responses  
Pedagogical tool for reflection  
Further our knowledge without prescription*

"A Script as Self-Study Method", was based on the transcript of our audio-recorded reflective conversation some months after the conference presentation. In our conversation, we reflected on how the staging of readers' theatre script served as a self-study method. In particular, we focused on the characteristic of *interaction* that LaBoskey (2004a) identified as central to self-study methodology. As LaBoskey (1998, as cited in LaBoskey, 2004a) pointed out, "especially in many cases, [self-study] researchers are not just interacting around an external data set; the interactions are the data set, or at least a part of it" (p. 848). Furthermore, "interaction within self-study for the purpose of studying our professional practice settings takes many forms" (LaBoskey, 2004a, p. 848). Similarly, we noted how verbal and non-verbal forms of interactions stimulated by the staging of the readers' theatre script—"speaking up" and "picking up cues from audience faces"—became our self-study data. These multiple forms of "*spontaneous, authentic responses*" served to "provide us with multiple perspectives" (LaBoskey, 2004b, p. 859) to further our reflections and ways of knowing as teacher educators and researchers committed to social change.

## *Connecting in Performance*

*Before, I was a bit apprehensive  
Performing was really liberating  
It was active fun, inviting pleasure  
I felt the anxiety fade away  
I began to merge with the character  
And became entangled in the picture  
Learning to interpret through performance  
The words took on a different meaning  
The message became powerful, profound*

"Connecting in Performance", was based on the transcripts of the script readers' voice notes. These voice notes became the most valuable source of new learning for us. "Connecting in Performance", draws attention to the lived experiences of the script readers and illustrates "performance itself [as] a way of knowing" (Pelias, 2008, p. 186). As Pelias (2008) explained, the conceptualisation of performance as a way of knowing "rests upon a faith in embodiment, in the power of giving voice and physicality to words, in the body as a site of knowledge" (p. 186). Pelias's (2008) exploration of performance as a way of knowing centres on the idea of "a working artist who engages in aesthetic performances as a methodological starting place" (p. 186). However, in the case of our script reading, only one of five script readers has expertise in the performing arts. The others share our interest in arts-inspired self-study methods, but would not describe themselves as working artists who engage in aesthetic performances.

We came to understand how the staging of a readers' theatre script as an arts-inspired method can "in, and of, itself serve as an intervention...that...can be transformative for the participants" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 366). Here, we are considering the five readers as participants for whom "*the words took on a different meaning*" and "*the message became powerful, profound*". In preparing to stage the script, our focus was on the audience's experience, and so we had not fully considered the experiences of the readers themselves. In composing and reflecting on the poem, "Connecting in Performance", we have become mindful of the transformative potential of inviting others to participate as readers in staging a readers' theatre script.

Nevertheless, the poem also shows that the readers did experience some initial apprehension and anxiety. We need to be sensitive to this, especially when considering involving students as readers. Forgasz and McDonough (2017) have cautioned that student participants in active and embodied pedagogic processes can experience discomforting feelings of initial apprehension and anxiety. However, they advise that engaging thoughtfully with such feelings can offer opportunities for “powerful learning” (p. 61).

## Implications

In the peer review feedback on our proposal for this paper, a reviewer asked, “*I want to know what message the authors might give to me as a non-theatrical teacher educator. What can I learn from their experiences? What else have they learnt about themselves and their craft as teacher educators – without my replicating the readers’ theatre?*”

This interaction was helpful to us in considering what our self-study might offer to others. First, we would like to clarify that we too are “*non-theatrical teacher educators*”. None of us has a professional or academic background in the performing arts or, indeed, in any of the many art forms we have explored through our collaborative arts-inspired self-study research over the years. What we share is our commitment to envisaging new ways of knowing for social change. It is because of this that we are always seeking inventive ways of knowing and engaging our own and others’ creativity through self-study.

The three blank verse poems communicate our learning about how the multiplicity of “active, embodied experiences” (Forgasz & McDonough, 2017, p. 58) involved in staging a readers’ theatre script can trigger processes of “*feeling* and *seeing* our way into knowing”. Such processes are experientially different to the “*thinking* our way into knowing” processes of “logical deduction and critical thinking [that are generally] prized as the most trustworthy processes of knowledge production” (Forgasz & McDonough, 2017, p. 58) in many teacher education and research contexts. From our perspective, active, embodied experiences that facilitate feeling and seeing our way into knowing in educational research and practice could be cultivated through a variety of means—with readers’ theatre being just one possibility. Our paper offers an exemplar of how we developed the staging of a readers’ theatre script as a self-study method and we hope that it will also offer some artistic inspiration to others who are committed to social change, but who might see themselves as “non-theatrical” or “not artistic”. Our collaborative arts-inspired interactions with many students and colleagues who have no formal background in the arts have shown us that creativity is central to our common humanity. Our task as teacher educators and educational researchers is to nourish that innate creativity in sensitive and generative ways to facilitate organic learning in the interests of social change and social justice.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The participants sent e-mail communications giving us consent to use their names, words, and screenshot video images in the script and publications. Our intention in making public their images and names was to acknowledge their contributions to our learning.

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