

Finding my self in a new place: Exploring professional learning through found poetry

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A Poetic Prologue

Finding My Self in a New Place

Early memories
Painful, painful, hard to move
Linger, pervasive...
Still struggling, struggling to move
Find my self in a new place

Introduction

In scholarly conversations about the writing of qualitative research texts as a form of inquiry in itself (e.g. Ellis et al., 2008; Richardson, 2003), poetry has been highlighted as a literary arts-based means of representing and engaging with the uniqueness and complexity of research participants' voices. Qualitative research scholars have shown how "settling [participants'] words together in new [poetic] configurations" can have a different and more profoundly felt impact, on both the reader and the writer, than the common practice of "quoting in prose snippets" (Richardson, 2000, p. 12). Poetry has also been explored as a mode of professional learning that can heighten self-insight and simultaneously invite others into an individual's learning process (e.g. Butler-Kisber, 2005; Furman, 2003). As Furman (2004) clarifies, "the images inspired by a poem engage the reader in a creative relationship that moves beyond passivity to co-creation" (p. 163).

The word "professional" has roots in the Latin *profiteri*, meaning "declare openly" (profession, n.d.). If we think about professional in this way, then it can denote that our professional learning (as a teacher, or teacher educator, or any other kind of professional) should involve going public with our learning as "knowing in the making" (Badley, 2009, p. 108). From this perspective then, turning our learning inside out and inviting others to engage with it and contribute to it, is integral to professional learning. Webster-Wright (2008) describes such inside-out learning as "authentic professional learning", inspired by "a spirit of critical inquiry where professionals can gain insight into their own learning and the assumptions they hold about their practice" (p. 727). It is in this spirit of critical inquiry that, using my self as subject, I make visible an extemporary process of exploring professional learning through poetry (Furman, 2003).

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In this article, I demonstrate how I composed a series of found poems through finding words and phrases in other texts and rearranging these words and phrases into poetic form (Butler-Kisber, 2005). I invite readers to journey with me as I use found poetry to come to terms with my struggle as a South African teacher educator to engage in an educative way with my students' written memory stories. Here I am thinking about Dewey's (1938/1963) conception of educative experience as "[arousing] curiosity, [strengthening] initiative, and [setting] up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future" (p. 38).

Setting the scene

In the light of the history of South Africa, it is important to explain that I am a White¹ woman who grew up during the apartheid era and obtained my initial teaching qualification in 1994, the same year in which South Africa's first democratic elections were held. This is particularly significant because of the apartheid regime of separate education, which meant that South African schoolchildren were set apart according to the National Party government's system of racial grouping. In my Master's research (Pithouse, 2003) I explored "my uneasy, unresolved relationship with the educational privilege that characterized my school experience as a white, middle-class, high-achiever in apartheid South Africa" (Pithouse, 2005, p. 206-207). However, although I grappled with my "internal dissonance with the *mis-educative* (Dewey 1938/1963, p. 25) system of privilege that enveloped my school experiences in a shroud of separateness and constraint" (Pithouse, 2005, p. 209), it was only after I completed my Master's research and began teaching teachers that I became aware of the extent to which my memories of school differed from those of many other South Africans.

In apartheid South Africa, White girls were the only learners² that were exempt from being physically punished at school by teachers (Morrell, 2001). I knew that White boys at my co-educational primary school received corporal punishment from teachers, but I have no memory of witnessing this. I also have only a few memories of children being emotionally injured by teachers. From what I remember, the worst part of my schooling was that I was often bored (Pithouse, 2003, 2005). And so, this was the picture of teachers that I carried with me into adulthood: perhaps not always very inspiring, but essentially not hurtful. When I became a schoolteacher myself in 1995, I tried very hard not to be boring and I did meet quite a few inspiring teachers. But, other than that, my perception of the average teacher remained largely undisturbed until I moved from teaching to teacher education.

I have been teaching graduate courses with practising teachers at a university in South Africa since 2003 (with three years away studying and working at other institutions). Initially, I taught classes in the specialisations of Curriculum Studies and Gender and Education. I now teach in the specialisation of Teacher Development Studies. My students are teachers who teach in a range of subject areas at primary and secondary schools and there are also a few who teach at higher education institutions. Some of my students are veteran teachers who have been teaching for 20 to 30 years and some are novice teachers.

I usually include some form of memory-work writing (Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan, 2014) in my courses. My intention is to offer students opportunities and means to make sense of their professional learning as teachers by remembering and reconsidering stories of the past and re-envisioning stories of the future (Pithouse, 2007, 2011). Over the years, I have developed and tried out various writing prompts to assist teachers to recall and narrate stories of their past experiences as

learners at school. For example, I recently used the visual arts-based memory-work writing prompt illustrated in Figure 1.

a) Think back to your own schooldays. Try to remember yourself as a primary or secondary school learner. Use the body template provided to create a self-portrait of yourself as a school learner.

b) Use the space around the body template to portray your memories of learning during your schooldays according to the following categories:

the school context/s (e.g. urban/rural; well-resourced/poorly resourced etc.);
the pedagogic approaches and methods;
the relationships and communication between teachers and learners;
the strategies for maintaining discipline.

You can draw pictures or paste in magazine pictures, photographs or other images that represent these learning memories. You can also add in key words and use colours that symbolise your feelings about these memories. Include as many details as you can remember. (Don't worry about how 'good' your portrait is.)

c) Give your self-portrait a title and write an 'artist's statement' to explain what you see when you look at this memory self-portrait. Try to explain in as much detail as possible, paying particular attention to describing sounds, colours, images, smells, and feelings.

(Remember to only disclose information that you feel comfortable with sharing. Also remember to respect others' rights to privacy and dignity and to use pseudonyms or false names when you refer to actual people and schools etc.)

Figure 1: A Visual Arts-Based Prompt for Memory-Work Writing

My doctoral study (Pithouse, 2007) took the form of self-study research into my own professional learning as a novice teacher educator. The aim of my self-study research was “to challenge, deepen, and extend [my] professional knowing in the interests of making a qualitative difference to professional practice for [my]self and others” (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015, p. 1). Since completing my doctoral thesis I have continued to ask students for informed consent to draw on their written work for my ongoing self-study research. I have built up a collection of school memory stories written in various forms by 125 students during 11 courses that I have taught between 2003 and 2015. In the 11 classes from which I collected the memory-work stories, my students were all African, Indian or Coloured,¹ with the exception of only two White students (both women). This is typical of all the courses that I have taught at this university.

My schooling experience as a privileged White girl meant that I was not prepared for what I would encounter in the first course I taught as a novice teacher educator in 2003. When I asked students to write memory stories of their own school days, they all communicated memories of harsh physical and verbal punishment and humiliation from teachers (as documented in Pithouse, 2011). Since then, I have become increasingly aware that, in writing about their memories of school, almost all the teachers in my classes have voiced stories of painful experiences. Even those that began their schooling after the 1996 prohibition of corporal punishment in post-apartheid South Africa have still written stories of physically and emotionally painful experiences at the hands of teachers³. Of course, there are also some joyful stories, but when I look through the collection of

memory stories, the melancholy stories are predominant and they are the ones that linger in my mind and heart. With respect to this, one of my students once wrote: “There are memories that are both painful and difficult to remember. Maybe what we find difficult or painful to remember could indicate the kind of teachers we are” (Pithouse, 2007, p. 116). During class discussions and in written reflections and feedback, many students have commented that no one has ever asked them about their schooling experiences before. This suggests to me that school memory stories do need to be voiced, listened to and responded to (Pithouse, 2007, 2011).

In the closing section of my doctoral thesis, I summarised my learning about teacher education in this way: “It...requires careful and self-reflexive attention to pedagogy and to the human experiences, relationships, and emotions that are at the heart of teaching and learning” (Pithouse, 2007, p. 209). Something that I have come to realise since I finalised my doctoral research is that my learning about teacher education and as a teacher educator will never be complete. I have become progressively mindful of an intuitive feeling that, although, or perhaps *because* I too find many of my students’ school memory stories painful and difficult, they have formed an important part of my own continuing professional learning. I have become conscious that these stories voiced by others might have something to tell me about what kind of teacher educator I am or would like to be. And yet, for a long time, I have struggled to conceive a generative and manageable way of working with the collection of school memory stories as part of my own knowing in the making as a teacher educator. How could I begin to make sense of all these stories that were not my own in relation to my own learning?

Exploring professional learning through found poetry

In May 2014, I started working with the collection of memory stories to create found poems by distilling and combining story fragments that communicate memories of being emotionally and physically wounded at school by teachers. I began by re-reading all the memory stories. As I read, I copied and pasted pertinent lines from the stories into a new composite text. In keeping with the conventions of found poetry, I did not add any words or phrases of my own (Butler-Kisber, 2005). The lines were pasted in the order in which I came across them in the stories, with no separation between lines taken from different stories. In this way, excerpts from diverse students’ stories merged into one dense text (as shown in Figure 2).

pinching of ears, cheeks, slaps on the head and been hit on the hands with sticks emotions of scared, anxious, hostile Their relationship with learners was hostile I felt an awful, stinging sensation which was a painful smack across my back followed by a hard throbbing smack across my face When I tried to explain what had happened I received another slap It is an experience I will never forget and is forever part of my being We were hit, humiliated, shouted at Teachers used a ruler or chalkboard duster to hit us One embarrassing punishment was holding my ears whilst going up and down in front of the class Most often corporal punishment was administered. It could have been for the most insignificant reasons such as talking, getting an answer wrong, not walking in a straight line or merely not looking at the board One day I had nausea and I vomited in class. She instructed me to pick it up with my own hands because I could mess her broom Learners were being hit on the knuckle which the teacher instilled in us that we were getting the punishment we deserved One form of discipline which I find hard to understand how my teachers could use was the chasing out of the classroom The use of the blackboard ruler not only had a physical effect but an emotional effect on me for every mistakes we were beaten using a stick, we were beaten for

Figure 2: A Section of the Composite Text Made of Lines From the Memory Stories

I read and re-read the composite text to colour code lines that expressed experiences that seemed connected. I then pulled out the lines that were in the same colour and started to fashion them into poetic form. This fashioning was a slow, back and forth process of selecting and discarding, arranging and rearranging words and phrases. It took place over months, in stolen moments.

The composition process was made more manageable by using the format of a pantoum poem as an organisational device for each poem. I felt that the French Malaysian pantoum poem format with “its repetitive lines [that allow] for the repetition of salient or emotionally evocative themes” (Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006, p. 28) might assist me in shaping poems that would distil and express the emotionally evocative refrains of the memory stories. I created pantoum poems using the following three stanza format:

Stanza 1:

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4

Stanza 2:

Line 5 (repeat of line 2)

Line 6

Line 7 (repeat of line 4)

Line 8

Stanza 3:

Line 9 (repeat of line 6)

Line 10 (repeat of line 3)

Line 11 (repeat of line 8)

Line 12 (repeat of line 1)

Using this three stanza format meant that I was limited to a total of six lines for each poem. So, I had to be very discerning about what I used from the composite text. This process of deciding on the most illuminating and evocative words and phrases forced me to think very carefully about what I understood to be at the heart of each of the poems that was emerging (Furman & Dill, 2015).

Ultimately, I created a sequence of six pantoum poems. Through crafting these poems I made visible and audible what, for me, are the most haunting refrains of the school memory stories.

Pantoum Poem 1

From an Early Age

From an early age
Teachers would hit us
Smack us across our small faces
Hit on the hands with sticks

Teachers would hit us
A painful smack
Hit on the hands with sticks
An awful, stinging sensation

A painful smack
Smack us across our small faces
An awful, stinging sensation
From an early age

Pantoum Poem 2

Until the Skin Broke

Pinching of ears
Slaps on the head
Hit on the hands
A smack across my face

Slaps on the head
A hard throbbing smack
A smack across my face
Pinching until the skin broke

A hard throbbing smack
Hit on the hands
Pinching until the skin broke
Pinching of ears

Pantoum Poem 3

Stick, Duster, Ruler

We were beaten
Using a stick
A chalkboard duster
The blackboard ruler

Using a stick
Hit on the hands
The blackboard ruler
Hit on the knuckle

Hit on the hands
A chalkboard duster
Hit on the knuckle
We were beaten

Pantoum Poem 4

For Mistakes, Forgetting, Failing

For mistakes we were beaten
Not walking in a straight line
Not looking at the board
Failing a test

Not walking in a straight line
Forgetting your pen
Failing a test
Arriving at school late

Forgetting your pen
Not looking at the board
Arriving at school late
For mistakes we were beaten

Pantoum Poem 5

I Vomited in the Hot Sun

I vomited in class
She instructed me
To pick it up
With my own hands

She instructed me
To clean the teachers' restroom
With my own hands
To stand in the hot sun for hours

To clean the teachers' restroom
To pick it up
To stand in the hot sun for hours
I vomited in class

Pantoum Poem 6

Worse Than any Beating

Teachers' voices were loud
Insulting, mocking us
Frightening and demeaning
It destroyed my soul

Insulting, mocking us
Worse than any beating
It destroyed my soul
Names which embarrassed us

Worse than any beating
Frightening and demeaning
Names which embarrassed us
Teacher's voices were loud

Richardson (2000) draws attention to how the processes and products of evocative writing forms such as poetry can “[touch] us where we live, in our bodies” (p. 11). Even though I worked with these poems for months, reading and rereading, shaping and reshaping, I still feel my neck and stomach tighten when I step back and take time to absorb each poem. I still find myself becoming tearful and feel the onset of a headache. As Langer and Furman (2004) explain, “the emotional intensity and the poignancy of the [students’ writing] were intensified” (para. 15) for me by distilling the longer memory stories into compact poems. Previous collective self-study research that I have done with close colleagues (Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & Van de Ruit, 2012; Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2015) has taught me that this particular kind of embodied response of tension and physical pain signals an emotionally significant experience that warrants deeper exploration. My

embodied, emotional response to the poems has heightened my awareness that, although the words and phrases that served as the raw material for these poems came from my students' writing, the poems were crafted by me and as such reveal as much, if not more, about my responses to the memory stories as they do about the stories themselves (Richardson, 2000). I came to see these poems as a "co-creation" (Furman, 2004, p. 163) that emerged from the "inter-animation" (Holquist, 1981, pp. 429-430) of my students' memory story writing and my poetry making.

And yet, despite realising the need for further exploration (or indeed maybe because I did realise this), I was unsure about where to move to after I had composed the six pantoum poems. In time, I decided that I needed a different poetic device to allow me to articulate and attend to my subjective responses to the pantoum poems (Langer & Furman, 2004).

As a starting point, I looked for another poetic mode to further reduce and reveal the core themes of the pantoum poems. For this purpose, I used the traditional Japanese poetic format of a tanka poem (Furman & Dill, 2015). I chose to use a version of the tanka format that has five lines, with a 5/7/5/7/7 syllable count in the lines (Poets.org, 2004). As Furman, Lietz, and Langer (2006, p. 28) clarify, "the use of the tanka, which is characterized by an extreme economy of words, forces the researcher to make decisions about what...should be included and what may be left out". In using this format I had to distinguish the elements of the pantoum poems that were most resonant for me. I took words and phrases from the six poems and moulded and remoulded them until I had composed the tanka poem, "Skin, Soul, Broke".

:

Tanka Poem 1

Skin, Soul, Broke

From an early age
We were beaten for mistakes
Until the skin broke
Loud, insulting, frightening
Teachers' voices broke my soul

Next, I created a second tanka poem to voice my subjective response to the "Skin, Soul, Broke" poem. To source material for the second tanka poem, I went back to an e-mail that I had written to a Canadian colleague in July 2015 about my evolving found poetry process. As I had done with the memory stories, I copied lines from the e-mail and pasted them into a new document to form a dense text (see Figure 3).

how I can work with it in a more generative way school memory-work teachers in my classes relate memories of painful school experiences – harsh physical and verbal punishment and humiliation from teachers current students were born after the end of apartheid and after the banning of corporal punishment, they still tell stories of physically and emotionally painful experiences at the hands of teachers such experiences are pervasive, even today, many teachers seem to feel that it is necessary to treat learners in this way in order for them to learn (which was one of the fundamental tenets of the apartheid education system) little attention seems to have been paid to the roles and responsibilities of teacher educators in all of this hearing the stories of learners' painful experiences has an emotional impact on me I am no longer surprised by the stories, I still feel shocked and disheartened by each new story I believe so strongly that hurting learners for any reason is inexcusable I find it difficult to listen and respond in a non-judgemental way when some of my students express views that are contrary to my own their memory stories do need to be told and listened to students say that no one has ever asked them about their schooling experiences before I am still struggling with it I see

Figure 3: A Section of the Dense Text Made of Lines From my E-mail to a Colleague

I took words and phrases from the dense text and fashioned a second tanka poem, “Shocked, Disheartened, Struggling”.

Tanka Poem 2

Shocked, Disheartened, Struggling

Teachers' memories
Painful, painful school stories
Linger, pervasive...
I still feel shocked, disheartened
I am struggling with my role

My composition of the “Shocked, Disheartened, Struggling” poem was guided by what I had read about the configuration of the content of a tanka poem:

The tanka employs a turn, known as a pivotal image, which marks the transition from the examination of an image to the examination of the personal response. This turn is located within the third line, connecting the *kami-no-ku*, or upper poem, with the *shimo-no-ku*, or lower poem (poets.org, 2004, para. 3).

The first two lines of the tanka poem, “Teachers' memories / Painful, painful school stories”, portray the image of melancholy school stories that is imprinted in my mind and heart. The third line, “Linger, pervasive...”, signals a shift to the impact that this image has on me. The final two lines voice my personal and professional response: “I still feel shocked, disheartened / I am struggling with my role”.

Composing the second tanka poem allowed me to shift my gaze from the memory stories themselves to look more carefully at my own response to the stories. After I had created this poem, I had a feeling that the words “I am struggling” (line 5) reminded me of something. Then I remembered an e-mail conversation I had had with one of my Master's students about the idea of struggling. I recalled that I had tried to find a way to acknowledge her concern that she was

struggling with writing her self-study research thesis, but also to inspire her to think of her struggle as something valuable and necessary. I could not remember exactly what I had written to her, but I found the e-mails saved on my computer.

In her e-mail, my student had revealed: “I have been putting hours of work into my writing, however, I feel like I am still struggling...”. My response was:

I think that all worthwhile research involves struggle – remember that to struggle can mean “to try very hard to move something or to move yourself somewhere” (<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/thesaurus/british/struggle>). So, without struggle, we don’t move or progress. Your awareness that you are struggling is a sign of your commitment to moving yourself somewhere new. So, keep struggling and you will find yourself in a new place! (E-mail communication, 13 August, 2013)

In re-reading the e-mails, I remembered how I had battled to find the words to express what I wanted to communicate to my student and how excited I had been to find this explanation of “to struggle” in an online dictionary: “to try very hard to move something or to move yourself somewhere” (struggle, n.d.). I am fascinated by the study of the origins of words and the ways in which word meanings have evolved throughout history. My interest is not so much from a historical perspective, but because of the multiple connotations or ways of perceiving that are revealed and the ways in which multiple meanings are opened up. Struggle often seems to have negative connotations and to be understood as something to be avoided whenever possible. This explanation of struggle as “to try very hard to move something or to move yourself somewhere” seemed to open up new and generative ways of understanding research and writing processes in general and of self-study research and writing processes in particular.

As I re-read the e-mail exchange, my advice to my student now seemed to be useful advice for me as well: “Your awareness that you are struggling is a sign of your commitment to moving yourself somewhere new. So, keep struggling and you will find yourself in a new place.” Reading the e-mail heightened my awareness that I was struggling and I had been struggling for over 10 years with trying to make sense of my professional learning in relation to my students’ memory stories of being emotionally and physically wounded at school by teachers. Thus, the next phase in my evolving exploration of professional learning was to use found poetry as a means to ask myself more consciously: What is my struggle? What am I trying very hard to move or where am I trying very hard to move myself?

In response, I formed a third tanka poem. In composing this poem, “Finding My Self in a New Place”, I took words and phrases from the two existing tanka poems and also from the e-mail to my student.

Tanka Poem 3

Finding My Self in a New Place

Early memories
Painful, painful, hard to move
Linger, pervasive...
Still struggling, struggling to move
Find my self in a new place

This tanka poem expresses how the memory stories that were not *my* stories have become my stories in the sense that they now live within me and in my thinking and feeling about my teaching. These “early memories” (line 1) keep me mindful of lived schooling experiences that I do need to be conscious of if I am to be a teacher educator in South Africa. These “painful, painful” (line 2) memory stories provoke corresponding emotional and physical pain in me. For that reason, they are inerasable from my heart, mind and body; they “linger, pervasive...” (line 3). They are “hard to move” (line 2) because they bring with them feelings of guilt at my privilege, at my exemption from such painful school memories. They are also hard to move because to my knowledge, from discussions with students and from reading research and newspaper reports, such stories are not in the past, they continue in post-apartheid South Africa (see Pithouse, 2011).

The memory stories are hard to move, but *I* can move. Through conversations with fellow self-study researchers (Pithouse-Morgan, Coia, Taylor, & Samaras, forthcoming), I have quite recently come to realise that one of the reasons why I am drawn to self-study research is that it is essentially an optimistic endeavour. One of the central requirements for quality and trustworthiness in self-study research in teacher education is to “provide evidence of the value of the changes in our ways of being teacher educators” (Feldman, 2003, p. 28). This means that if you opt into self-study research you have to believe that such change is possible. For me, one of the great gifts of self-study research is an optimistic commitment to moving yourself somewhere new, with the intention of finding new ways in which professional learning can happen.

I cannot change what has happened in South African schools. I cannot take away those painful memories. But *I* can change. In exploring professional learning through found poetry, I find my self in a new place where I have a heightened awareness of struggling to move as a valuable and necessary element of professional learning. Through found poetry, I have become more aware of how and why I have been struggling for over a decade to engage in an educative way with my students’ school memory stories. I am still struggling.

Moving somewhere new

Webster-Wright (2008) portrays professional learning as “embedded and constructed in the experience of being a professional in practice. Here, practice is not a situation separate from the professional, but a social, dynamic, and integral part of being a professional working in the current context” (pp. 724-725). To this, I would add that professional learning is also embedded and constructed in the experience of being a professional working in the context of the past. We are all “burdened with a past for which we are accountable – even though it is not all of our own making” (Conle, 2000, p. 192). In contexts such as South Africa, which bear legacies of prolonged, painful and divisive political conflict and repression, revisiting the past with the aim of stimulating

professional learning is a complicated and often personally and professionally risky endeavour, which generates more questions than answers (Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pithouse, & Allnutt, 2011). Nonetheless, it is necessary if we are to “[look] the beast of the past in the eye...in order not to allow it to imprison us” (Tutu, 1998, p. 22).

As frightening as it might be, looking the beast of the past in the eye is necessary for teachers and teacher educators in particular because of our professional obligations to the children we serve, whether directly or indirectly (Guilfoyle, Hamilton, & Pinnegar, 1997). Kirk and Winthrop (2013) have drawn attention to how, in contexts where people’s everyday lives are harmed by political conflict and the aftermath of such conflict, some teachers respond by acting in ways that are “abusive and disempowering, and many more may use teaching methods that marginalise certain students and that do not encourage questioning, analysis or critical thinking” (p. 122). Kirk and Winthrop further caution:

While other teachers bring great benefits to their students, we cannot take for granted that schools are always positive and beneficial places for children. Authoritarian and abusive behaviour, including corporal punishment, by teachers, often creates quite the opposite of a healthy and healing classroom environment. It is therefore particularly important to provide effective teacher training, support and professional development...in these contexts.... (p. 122)

Kirk and Winthrop’s observations and recommendations, based on studies done in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, suggest that the emotionally distressing and physically painful experiences portrayed in my students’ memory stories are not uniquely South African and also that they are not surprising, given South Africa’s history; rather, they are quite predictable and comprehensible consequences of years of pervasive oppression, violence, displacement, economic deprivation and so on.

What does this mean then for professional learning in teaching and teacher education within and beyond South Africa? How do we begin to work towards establishing healthy and healing classroom environments in schools, universities and other spaces where teacher and teacher educator learning happen? Dembélé and Rogers (2013) recommend that we start by “paying attention to teachers’ own voices or stories, to who they really are, to the forces and factors that motivate and demotivate them, and to the challenges that affect their basic well-being” (p. 178). In an attempt to “reposition teachers’ experiences and voices at the centre of teacher development”, teacher educators across a number of universities in South Africa (including my own) have been using arts-based pedagogic and research approaches such as “participatory videos, photo-messages, drawings or pieces of autobiographical writing” (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2013, p. 85). The responses of the teachers who have taken part in these arts-based initiatives have pointed to several key ways in which creative and participatory approaches can enhance professional learning: engagement and deep thinking; dialogue and sharing; enjoyment; taking action; and emotional growth (pp. 85-87). In addition, in the field of psychology in South Africa, Collins (2013) has been developing a therapeutic pedagogic approach aimed at equipping students “to deal with some of the most pressing social problems that exist in South African society” (p. 136) as well as to “to facilitate personal and social transformation” (p. 147). A deliberate and widespread integration of creative and therapeutic pedagogic approaches in pre-service teacher education and continuing teacher professional development might contribute to enhancing “teacher identity, motivation and well-being” (Kirk &

Winthrop, p. 137) so that the pain of the past is contained and healed rather than inflicted time and again on our children.

Finding my self

Richardson (2000) clarifies that how we choose to compose research texts affects not only what we can write about, but also how we relate to what we write about and how we come to see ourselves in and through that writing. She highlights how, through evocative forms of writing such as poetry, “we find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences, and so on; we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves, our doubts, and our uncertainties” (p. 11). Creating found poetry has certainly afforded me insights that I might not otherwise have been able to access. The poetic devices of the pantoum and tanka poems helped to frame and reframe my contingent and changing knowing in the making. Poetry also assisted me to come to a place of feeling more at peace with what I still do not know (and indeed might never know), to “[step] aside from [my] conventional ‘expert’ role of researcher [and teacher educator] in order to engage productively with doubt, ambiguity and the unexpected” (Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan, p. 94). As Furman (2003) describes, through creating found poetry I have come “to feel some sense of empathy towards myself, helping me to be less judgmental of my struggles” (p. 92).

Yet, exploring professional learning through found poetry is not reducible to a series of steps that will reliably solve a particular problem within a prescribed time period. While a technique such as found poetry can enable the complex human experience of professional learning, it has to be accompanied by a deeply felt commitment to keep struggling to move our selves somewhere new. Going public with my continuing struggle and turning my professional learning inside out through found poetry has been a slow, emergent and often disorienting process. There were many times when I almost gave up because I could not see the way ahead. I think that what kept me moving, backwards and forwards, inwards and outwards, was a sense that I owed it my students (past and future) to learn from their memory stories. As I make my way as a teacher educator, teaching others about professional learning, I hope I will take with me an enhanced sense of empathy towards others, helping me to be less judgmental and more supportive of their struggles as an integral part of their own professional learning.

To end, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of an anonymous peer reviewer of this article. In response to a suggestion made by the reviewer, I looked again at literature on teacher professional learning to see how my inquiry might link with other research in this area. For the first time in all the years that I have been grappling with how to engage in an educative way with my students’ memory stories, I made a connection to Kirk and Winthrop’s seminal work on teacher professional learning in conflict and post conflict contexts (e.g. Kirk & Winthrop, 2013; Winthrop & Kirk, 2005, 2008). While I had been aware of this research, I had never before thought about how this work done outside of South Africa might offer me another perspective on what I was struggling to understand inside South Africa. Sharing my unfinished writing with an unseen other has thus been integral to my ongoing professional learning. The imperfections in what I produce as a teacher educator, researcher, writer (and poet) provide openings for continuing professional learning through engagement with others.

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¹ In the apartheid era (1948-1994), the government used the racial classifications of African, Coloured, Indian, and White to stratify South African society. 'African' referred to people who were understood to be indigenous to Africa, 'Indian' referred to people who were understood to have ancestral heritage from India, 'Coloured' referred to people who were understood to be of 'mixed race', and White referred to people who were understood to have ancestral heritage from Europe. These racial categories are still used by the current government for policy and data collection purposes. When I refer to these categories in this article, I am aware that they are, in one sense, artificial and somewhat arbitrary socio-political constructions. However, I am also aware that they continue to have a significant influence on the lives of people in post-apartheid South Africa. And I am aware that these categories play a significant part in processes of identity construction in South Africa. Although the terms 'Coloured' and 'White' are not generally capitalised, I capitalise them in this article to show that I am referring specifically to constructions of race that are a legacy of the apartheid era.

² In South Africa, students at tertiary institutions are generally referred to as "students", while students at primary or secondary schools are referred to as "learners".

³ After the 1996 prohibition of corporal punishment, it was discontinued in middle-class, formerly white, schools, but research (e.g. Moyo, Khewu, & Bayaga, 2014; Morrell, 2001; Payet, & Vije, 2008) confirms that it remains relatively common in other South African schools.

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