Editorial: Exploring possibilities through methodological inventiveness in self-reflexive educational research

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If the primary aim of educational research is to advance knowledge about education, then how or why does the self of the researcher matter? It matters if we think about knowledge[1] as a human "capacity for knowing, understanding." From this perspective, knowledge cannot be entirely detached from the knower, the person who knows or understands. And that person, in turn, is embedded in a web of relationships and encounters that influence and are influenced by individual "knowing in the making" (Badley, 2009, p. 108). As Eisner explained, "Whatever it is we think we know is a function of a transaction between the qualities of the world we cannot know in their pure, nonmediated form, and the frames of reference, personal skills, and individual histories we bring to them (1992, p. 13). If knowing is interconnected with the knower, then can knowledge about education be far-reaching enough without knowledge about the educational researcher? In our continual quest to move forward by creating new knowledge about education, do we pause to consider our awareness of the self who seeks to know? Enter self-reflexivity.

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[1] See the *Online Etymology Dictionary*. https://www.etymonline.com/word/knowledge

The word reflexive[2] stems from the Latin reflexivus, which means "capable of bending or turning back." In simple terms then, self-reflexivity in educational research can be understood as the researcher bending or turning back to encounter a sense of perplexity or questioning about the self. But, this sense of "unknowing" (Vasudevan, 2011, p. 1154) is often absent in accounts of educational research that appear to be disconnected from the uniqueness, complexity, and ambiguity of the researcher's lived experience. This absence might be because, as Badley has cautioned, "too many academics, too many of us, fail to write like human beings. Indeed, we may actually have been taught to write like disembodied professionals" (2019, p. 180).

But what does it mean to become conscious of and curious about the embodied self who researches? What does self-reflexivity in research look like and feel like? Here, it is helpful to turn to stories of lived experience, which can sometimes make a point more vividly and powerfully than can an explanation (Badley, 2019). The late Jackie Kirk, a British-Canadian educational researcher and a pioneer in the field of humanitarian aid and development, told one such story about her study of the lives of women teachers in developing contexts.

> In my own experience, the praxis of reflexivity 'in the field' includes a sustained attention to the positions in which I place myself and am placed by others, a listening to and acknowledging of inner voices, doubts and concerns as well as pleasures and pride, and a sensing of what my body is feeling. It implies a constant questioning of what I am doing and why. I start to probe each of these experiences and sensations to ask: Why? From where? Founded on what? I started to theorise based on my own experiences. (Kirk, 2005, pp. 233–234)

Of particular relevance to this themed issue on "exploring possibilities through methodological inventiveness in self-reflexive educational research," is Kirk's attention to self-reflexivity not only as a phenomenon but also as a method. She described how, inspired by the literary arts, she created a distinctive form of a vignette (a brief evocative description or story) to enable self-reflexivity in diverse aspects of her research and writing process.

> In taking such a reflexive approach to the study, it became necessary for me to develop process and form for my writing that was in keeping with my research aims and would do justice to my findings. . . . Developing vignettes around my research experience made it more possible to convey powerful, multi-faceted and multi-sensory representations of research data, analysis and interpretations . . . I wrote and rewrote in order to think through and process the data I had collected, and to reflect on issues of language, position, power, and authority. I completed evocative texts that aim to engage the reader and draw her into the experiences being explored. As part of the analytical process, in the rewriting of these texts, I borrowed from the genre of fiction, most especially for its attention to language, sounds and rhythms, and its power to explore and then provoke an emotional response. I aimed to make the events

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[2]   See *The Online Etymology Dictionary* https://www.etymonline.com/word/reflexive

> more meaningful for the reader through attention to a narrative structure and to what I know is the evocative power of the story. (2005, pp. 234–235)

Although written earlier and in a different context, the words of Dadds and Hart are applicable to Kirk's designing of vignettes; she was "creating [her] own unique way through [her] research" (2001, p. 166). Her literary-arts inspired research practice demonstrates that notion of "methodological inventiveness" (p. 169) identified by Dadds and Hart in the work of practitioner researchers who "reached out for their own unique ways of doing or writing up their research, in response to the perceived needs of their particular project and their own preferred thinking and representational styles" (p. 3). By practitioner research, these scholars were referring to research intended "to serve professional practices" (p. 169), such as teaching. They asked, "What motivates some practitioner researchers to take an unconventional, innovative direction in their research; to employ their powers of creativity in surprising ways; to think and do differently from the mainstream research they have met?" (p. 1). For Kirk, methodological inventiveness, informed by the arts, was interdependent with her commitment to self-reflexivity and social change. Her desire to acknowledge and pay close attention to her physical, emotional, and intellectual self, in service of more complex, ethical, and generative ways of knowing, stimulated her creativity and vice-versa.

Inventiveness[3] has roots in ideas of discovery, of "bring[ing] to light what existed before but was not known." In Kirk's work, infusing her research process with a creative combination of elements of the literary arts enabled her to bring to light, question, and theorise new self-knowledge. Eisner emphasised this close relationship between the arts and self-discovery and growth.

> Through the arts, we learn to see what we had not noticed, to feel what we had not felt, and to employ forms of thinking that are indigenous to the arts. These experiences are consequential, for through them we engage in a process through which the self is remade. (2002, p. 12)

In thinking about how the arts can nourish the interdependence of methodological inventiveness and self-reflexivity, we find it useful to draw on understandings of "arts-informed research [as] a mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by . . . the arts broadly conceived" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). As they elucidated,

> The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of advancing knowledge. (p. 59)

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[3]   See the *Online Etymology Dictionary* https://www.etymonline.com/word/invention

In our understanding, although methodologically inventive researchers might not always make direct connections to the arts in their work, their inventiveness is set in motion and nourished by the "imaginative processes that are so characteristic [of the arts]" (Eisner, 2002, p. 198). And imagination is a common thread connecting the articles in this themed issue. As a collection, the six articles show how imaginative encounters with the multifaceted self of the researcher can enable generative ways of coming to know about and for education.

In acknowledgment of the influence of the literary arts on our ways of knowing as educational researchers (see Pithouse-Morgan, Naicker, Pillay, Masinga, & Hlao, 2016; Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay, & Naicker, 2017), we composed a medley of poems to offer a poetic preview of each of the articles that make up this themed issue. In creating the medley, we selected words and phrases from the articles and rearranged them in keeping with the concise traditional Japanese poetic format of a tanka poem, which "is concerned primarily with the working out of human emotion and conveying an authentic, personal voice" (Breckenridge, 2016, p. 4).

Awakening Self-Reflexivity
– Inspired by the voice of James A. Bernauer

Creating a spark
Ignites curiosity.
A dynamic flow
Invites a new awareness –
Living, growing and learning.

Alone on Stage
– Inspired by the voice of J. Scott Baker

Perform poetry
Hybrid methodology
Beyond normative
Avoid ventriloquism
Open space for dialogue

Having Fun Seriously
– Inspired by the voice of Marguerite Müller

Pathways to knowing
Novel and inventive ways
Organic response
Resist, transcend traditions
Playful and authentic texts

Imaginative Teacher
– Inspired by the voice of Kirsten Woitek

Memory tilted
Separating past-present!

Poetry and art
Multiple voices emerge
Expand teacher self-knowledge

Artefacts of Thinking
– Inspired by the voice of Tanya van der Walt

My self-in-action
Rhizomatic concept map
Visibility
Springboards to distil reading
To clarify my ideas

Embroidering Becoming
– Inspired by the voice of Tamara S. Hancock

Embroidering quotes
Tell stories of becoming
Inventive analysis
Connections of becoming
Unstable, unknowable

As the poems intimate, the contributions to this themed issue explore both *why* and *how* educational researchers across different contexts in South Africa and the United States are enacting self-reflexivity through methodological inventiveness. The six articles are written "for human readers" (Badley, 2019, p. 180). They are candid and engaging, offering vivid, detailed illustrations and descriptions of the researchers' experiences, actions, and deliberations. And, by drawing on a range of creative research practices and resources, including embroidery, fiction, narrative, painting, performance, photo-elicitation, poetry, storytelling, and visual mapping the articles exemplify *what* can be made possible and visible through researching in imaginative, embodied ways.

The issue opens with James Bernauer's article, "How calls for research can awaken self-reflexivity and latent interests in scholarly inquiry." In this piece, he reflects on how particular "calls for research" can produce a spark igniting curiosity, transforming hidden and essentially "unconscious interests" into narrative interpretations. Through dynamically integrating psychological perspectives with autoethnographic experience in scholarly inquiry, a new awareness of living, growing, and learning happens. J. Scott Baker's article, "Alone on stage: How one LGBTIQ+ educator uses poetic performative autoethnography for social change" serves to encourage and inspire self-reflexive researchers to use poetic performance as inquiry to promote social change. Baker's piece draws attention to the possibilities generated by creating a hybrid methodology for opening up dialogue and discussion of obstacles facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) educators in secondary schools and beyond. In Marguerite Müller's article, "Having fun seriously matters: A visual arts-based narrative of methodological inventiveness," she highlights why and how seeking to become a self-reflexive educational researcher opens up spaces for playful and inventive pathways for knowing self, resisting restrictive traditions,

and transforming organically in a context of rapid social and educational change. Kirsten Woitek's article, "Creative inquiry: Exploring teacher researcher self-reflexivity through arts-based self-study" exemplifies how reflexively exploring her lived past-present experiences as an English teacher through multifaceted, artistic research practices deepened and informed a different understanding of her teacher self in relation to English learners. Tanya van der Walt's article, "'Show, don't tell': Using visual mapping to chart emergent thinking in self-reflexive research" illustrates how actively engaging in rhizomatic (multidimensional and non-linear) concept maps as visual tools for "designing, conducting, interpreting, and writing phases of a research project" can provide imaginative springboards to distil reading and to clarify research ideas. Finally, Tamara Hancock's piece, "Embroidery as method: Stitching together narrative becomings and data" intricately interrogates women's stories of becoming-veterinarians along with her story of becoming-scholar. She highlights why and how using narrative inquiry as a self-reflexive or diffractive methodology holds much promise for understanding the personal-professional self as unknowable, unstable, and relational.

Overall, the articles in this issue offer a range of unique insights into how the generative intersection of self-reflexivity and inventiveness can contribute to advancing knowledge about education. Nevertheless, we are mindful that, as Ball (2012) pointed out,

> In addition to the creation of new knowledge, we must remember that the conduct of research, though necessary, is not sufficient to address social problems, mitigate inequalities, or advance innovative methods of instruction. For this very reason, [the *educational* focus of our research] demands that we not only advance knowledge about education and encourage scholarly inquiry related to education but that we also promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good. (p. 284, emphasis added)

In looking across the articles, we can see how imaginative engagement to stimulate alternative methodological modes has potential to contribute critically to new and generative ways of knowing self, with wider implications for educational and social change (Dadds & Hart, 2001). Methodological inventiveness in self-reflexive research "can heighten our consciousness that some change for the better is almost always within reach" (Pithouse-Morgan, Coia, Taylor, & Samaras, 2016, p. 455). As Eisner (2002) pointed out, "Imagination gives us images of the possible that provide a platform for seeing the actual, and by seeing the actual freshly, we can do something about creating what lies beyond it (p. 4). Creativity from a self-critical perspective challenges us to reflect and answer Bryant's questions: "How do we transform ourselves, our collaborators, and our readers? What are the implications of our research for social change?" (2015, p. 3). Mitchell has called on educational researchers to "[expand our] repertoire of being and doing" to engage self-critically with questions of our social responsibility (2008, p. 365). And as Badley (2019, p. 184) has emphasised, "this strategy, perspective, or narrative should also help us deal with social and political problems to embrace change with enthusiasm."

Studies presented in this themed issue illustrate how self-reflexivity and methodological inventiveness can illuminate significant issues of social in/justice concerning self and beyond

and can point to avenues for exploration and growth in the wider educational arena. For example, in the US context, J. Scott Baker furnishes a perspicacious account of the potential of poetic performative autoethnography for self and the audience as a mechanism for social change towards the achievement of acceptance, equality, and workplace protections for LGBTIQ+ educators. Kirsten Woitek, using multiple arts-based methods such as poetry and art, makes visible how inventiveness made transparent her subjectivities concerning immigrant English learners as an ESOL[4] teacher in the US and how enhanced self-reflexivity is contributing to the critical transformation of her teacher self. And Marguerite Müller, writing from a South African higher education perspective, explores how creativity can lead to a better understanding of personal experiences, identities, and subjectivities in a context in which protests are intensifying for government to provide free tertiary education for the students from low-income households and for the decolonisation of higher education.

Taken as a whole, this themed issue illustrates the potential of methodologically inventive self-reflexive educational research as a productive space in which researchers may become conscious of and work on themselves in artful and ethical ways. The articles in the issue portray researching as a process that is as important as its products. They bring to light the human experiences, relationships, and emotions that give life and meaning to educational research. Crucially, they also call attention to how unknowing and uncertainty in researching can point to significant opportunities for discovery and growth. The "productive ambiguity" of "material . . . [that] is more evocative than denotative . . . generates insight and invites attention to complexity" (Eisner, 1997, p. 8), allowing us to see self in multiple ways and offering multi-perspective ways of seeing the world. Creative self-reflexive research as ethical practice for re-knowing the self and how we choose to come to know can challenge normative ways of knowing in the service of confronting what troubles us most. Re-imagining the self of the researcher can open up opportunities for new ways of igniting, conceptualising, and practising research for educational and social change.

To close, we offer a composite poem created from the poetic medley. This free form poem, "A Rhizomatic Spark" expresses our combined knowing in the making as editors of the themed issue and is also an invitation to join us in re-encountering the self of the researcher in imaginative ways—always in service of making a qualitative difference to human experience in educational settings.

A Rhizomatic Spark

My unknowable self-in-action
Creating a rhizomatic spark
Resist, transcend traditions!
Open hybrid dialogue
Dynamic, imaginative voices
Organic becoming

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[4]   English to speakers of other languages

Dedications

We dedicate this themed issue to the memory of Jackie Kirk (1968–2008), whose self-reflexive methodological inventiveness remains our touchstone, and to the memory of Elliot Eisner (1933–2014), whose pithy statement, "The opposite of aesthetic is anaesthetic!" spoken in a crowded conference room in Vancouver, Canada in 2012, was a rhizomatic spark for us.

Acknowledgment

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