Learning from the First Year of the Transformative Education/al Studies (TES) Project

Liz Harrison
Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan
Joan Conolly
Thenjiwe Meyiwa

Abstract

The Transformative Education/al Studies project (TES) is a three-year, funded project led by researchers from three universities: a University of Technology, a Research-Intensive university, and a rural Comprehensive University. The project participants are academic staff members who are pursuing Masters and Doctoral studies and their supervisors. These participants, all engaged in self-study of their practice in Higher Education, form an inter-institutional, trans-disciplinary learning community.

TES aims to enhance and study the development of self-reflexive pedagogic, research and supervision capacity among these participants. In this article, we make public our learning thus far about supporting an emerging postgraduate research learning community involving academic staff working and studying in three very different university contexts. The data sources comprise digital logbooks kept by participants, workshop evaluations, and the researchers' personal reflections and communications. Our analysis contributes to a body of academic work that explores how collaborative and social approaches to scholarship can enhance research capacity, productivity and quality in Higher Education. The conceptual underpinning of the article is that of reflexive *ubuntu*, which demands a consciousness of our developing 'selves' as researchers and supervisors and of our interrelationships with other people.

Keywords: postgraduate research, self-study of educational practice, collaborative scholarship, learning communities, postgraduate teaching and learning, reflexive *Ubuntu*, trust, care

Introduction

The work discussed here is of a project that, perhaps idealistically, set out to enhance and study the development of self-reflexive pedagogic, research and supervision capacity among academic staff at three very different South African universities. Drawing from Badley (2009:107), who explains academic writing 'as a process of reflecting upon our experience and on the experience of others in an attempt to make useful suggestions for change and growth as part of a conversation in progress', this article examines our lived experience as project-leaders, researchers and supervisors. We offer some 'lessons' that will guide our future work on the project and that might also assist others who are interested in supporting postgraduate research using novel and contextually-appropriate methodologies.

To begin, we give a brief overview of the project. We then lay a conceptual and thematic foundation for reflecting on our own experience of the project by 'explicitly [acknowledging] the contributions of others to [our] thinking' (Nash 2004:66), and identifying two key 'scholarly conversations' we wish to contribute to (Clandinin & Connelly 2000:136). Next, we explain how we have studied the project so far. This leads us to two important lessons learned and our concluding thoughts on how the project will continue to grow and on broader implications for postgraduate research education.

An Overview of the Transformative Education/al Studies (TES) Project

The Project Contexts and Participants

The Transformative Education/al Studies project (TES) is a three-year (2011-2013), South African National Research Foundation (SA-NRF)-funded project led by researchers from three diverse university contexts: a University of Technology, a Research-Intensive University, and a rural Comprehensive university. Between 2002 and 2005, the South African

Higher Education sector underwent processes of extensive integration, which were referred to as ‘the merger’. These processes were meant to bring about a more equitable post-apartheid education dispensation to contribute towards meeting the requirements of a fast-developing new democratic nation. Over a period of four years, 46 universities and former technikons were merged in various ways to produce 23 universities in three categories: research-intensive universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities (which offer both academic and technological qualifications). One of the consequences of ‘the merger’ is that the University of Technology and Research-Intensive University each have a number of campuses spread across two cities that are about 45 minutes’ drive apart, while the Comprehensive University (which is situated in a more rural area about a day’s drive from the other two universities) has four campuses that are between two-three hours’ drive apart.

In 2011, the first year of the TES project, the participants were 22 staff-students (university educators who are pursuing Masters and Doctoral studies) – ranging in age from mid-20s to late 40s – and their 12 supervisors – ranging in age from early 30s to late 50s. Thus far, the participants (including staff-students and supervisors) have comprised approximately 80% women and 20% men. More staff-students and supervisors have asked to join TES in 2012, which demonstrates growing interest in this kind of scholarly collaboration and also perhaps reflects our institutions’ focus on increasing the numbers of academic staff qualified with doctorates and master’s degrees. The Academy of Science of South Africa’s (ASSAf) PhD study (2010) indicates that only about a third of all permanent academic staff members at South African universities holds a doctoral qualification. This is disaggregated into 40% of academic staff at research-intensive universities, 27% at comprehensive universities and 12% at universities of technology. It is therefore a national imperative to increase the numbers of academic staff holding advanced degrees (and to reduce the age of the professoriate) that drives much research activity in our three institutions – all seeking to establish a particular identity. The University of Technology, for example, is trying to establish itself in terms of high-level vocational skills, yet with a research agenda that critically engages with epistemologies of technology (Winberg 2005). The Comprehensive University seeks to strengthen its position with a renewed focus on research, whereas the

Research-Intensive University is seeking to improve its world rankings for research.

Purpose of the Project

The staff-student and supervisor participants in TES, all engaged in self-study of their practice in Higher Education, form an inter-institutional, trans-disciplinary learning community. A wide range of academic and professional disciplines is represented, for example, Communication, Drama, Jewellery Design, Journalism, Photography, Academic Development, Accounting Education and Maths Education. TES aims to enhance and study the development of self-reflexive pedagogic, research and supervision capacity among participants. To that end, we are working to develop a community of collaborative scholarship, which is underpinned by the methodology of self-study of our practice in Higher Education (as discussed later on in this article). Within that community, we, Liz, Kathleen, Joan and Thenjiwe, play multiple roles as project-leaders, researchers and supervisors. We are an inter-institutional, trans-disciplinary project team, with diverse academic backgrounds inclusive of Academic Development, Teacher Development, Orality-Literacy Studies, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Gender Studies.

Project Activities to Date

In 2011, the TES staff-students and supervisors came together for two inter-institutional workshops (three - five days each) led by international experts in self-study of educational practice, Professor Claudia Mitchell (see Mitchell *et al.* 2005) and Professor Jack Whitehead (see Whitehead & McNiff 2006). These workshops were also attended by academic staff and students who are not 'official' TES project participants, but who are interested in learning more about self-study of practice in Higher Education. We also had a dedicated 'supervisors' day' at each of these workshops. We are facilitating on-going research support meetings at our individual institutions and we have two online TES classrooms, a dedicated TES list serve and are participating in related international list serves. Over the next two years,

there are plans for further workshops as well as a public conference, public website and edited book.

Reflexive Ubuntu as a Conceptual Stance for the TES Project

Our diverse understandings of and aspirations for the TES project come together in a shared conceptual stance that we refer to as reflexive ubuntu. Reflexivity, first posited by Gouldner (1971), entails analytic attention to the researcher's role, and the inclusion of the researcher as a researchable topic. In taking a reflexive approach, we are making a theoretical and, we would argue, ethical commitment to 'thinking about [our] own thought' (Grumet 1989:15) and '[recognising] and [taking] responsibility for [our] positions within [our] research' (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki 2011:389), which is akin to what Alasuutari *et al.* (2008) and Litosseli (2008) maintain is a form of consciously exploring the way people talk about their lives. Reay (1996:59-60) describes reflexivity as a continual consideration of the ways in which the researcher's social identity and values affect the data gathered and the picture of the social world produced. Concurring with Reay, Mauthner and Doucet (1998:121) note that reflexivity entails

> reflecting upon and understanding our own personal, political and intellectual autobiographies as researchers and making explicit where we are located in relation to our research respondents.

Thus, taking a reflexive stance demands that we pay close and mindful attention not only to our 'selves' as researchers and supervisors, but also to our interrelationships with the other people who participate in any way in our research and education endeavours (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki 2011).

We make theoretical links between reflexivity and anti-colonial, feminist, and critical pedagogy perspectives (see, for example, Freire 1970; Lather 1991; Smith 1999) that call into question the silencing and 'othering' of research subjects or learners in research and educational processes and aim to elide power/status differentials in valuing the experience and knowledge of the participants/learners and researchers/teachers. Significantly, in TES the research projects are about self-learning and this requires what Feldman *et al.* (2004: 974) identify as one of the most

important methodological features of self-study approaches to educational research, which is 'to be self-critical of one's role as both practitioner and researcher'. Moreover, given that the idea of the practitioner-researcher as research subject is often not readily accepted in institutional structures, TES has served as a forum through which staff-students can challenge any possible silencing of themselves as 'research subjects'. This is evidenced in a statement made by one of the inter-institutional workshop participants, Nalini Chitanand, when she says that the project 'has been invaluable in framing my own ideas in terms of transformative education practices and my own practice as an Academic Development Practitioner'. Thus, we would support the view advanced by Prell (1989:248) that reflexivity is an essential precipitator and outcome of emancipatory research and education.

Because we understand reflexivity as demanding a consciousness of our developing 'selves' as researchers and supervisors, and of our interrelationships with other people, we see significant interconnections between the concept of reflexivity and the southern African concepts of ubuntu (in the Nguni languages) and botho (in the Sotho and Tswana languages) that recognise 'self' as ongoing, and relational processes of becoming (Mkhize 2004). Sithole's (2010) outlook on ubuntu and social cohesion best explain this interconnection. She states that the practice of human rights and human responsibility is necessary in learning contexts that may have elements or people that have been damaged by social ills (Sithole 2010). Some stories of the staff-students and supervisors that participate in the TES project bear/bare wounds – their own or their students' – that are indicative of pervasive social ills in South Africa, such as HIV & AIDS, poverty and violence. Reflecting on the value of participating in the project, Bwalya Lungu, a staff-student, reveals that she has been 'made to understand how valuable it is to share our stories about our lives and practices; they shape the type of teachers and learners we are'. This statement highlights one of the significant elements of reflexive ubuntu, which is awareness and acknowledgement of other people's life courses. Hence, we also find Eden Charles's (2007) work on ubuntu and transformation useful in understanding the value of locating oneself in the experiences of others as a form of demonstrating an ethics of care and trust. Covey (2006:33) identifies five levels or waves of trust: 'self trust, relationship trust, organizational trust, market trust, societal trust'. We believe that the two lessons from our

practice distilled in this article indicate all five levels: Lesson One promotes relationship, organisational and 'market' (in the sense of academia) trust. Lesson Two speaks to learning self-trust and relationship trust.

Rossman and Rallis (1998:248) would define the reflexive ubuntu conceptual stance we have outlined above as a demonstration of 'interplay of sensitivity and a simultaneous awareness of "self" and "others"', which are central tenets in auto-ethnographic approaches to self-study research (Ellis 2004). For us, taking this kind of theoretical stance has contributed to an awareness of having to recognise shared human attributes of the supervisors and staff-students who participate in the TES project.

Scholarly Conversations that Situate the TES Project

Self-study of Educational Practice

Self-study of educational practice has its roots in teacher educators and teachers seeking to enhance their self-understanding and their pedagogy, as well as to contribute to public scholarly and professional conversations (see, among others, Mitchell *et al.* 2005; Samaras 2010). More and more, self-study of practice is taking place within a trans-disciplinary community of scholar-practitioners across the human and social sciences (see Pithouse *et al.* 2009b). Through studying their own selves and practice, these scholar-practitioners seek to 'illuminate significant social questions and make a qualitative difference to shared human experience' (Pithouse *et al.* 2009a:2). Thus, the overarching self-study research question for TES participants, which, when applied idiosyncratically, yields a broad spectrum of insights and outcomes, is: 'How do I transform my educational practice as ….?' (also see Whitehead 2000). This research question can be applied to the individual participant's direct educational context, with a range of responses and insights and also across the TES learning community's diverse educational contexts, thus becoming 'How do we transform our educational and research practice as a learning community?'

The TES project aims to build on and expand the body of self-study research to date. It also draws on work done in other key areas of research that focus on the transformative potential of educators' scholarly inquiry into their own pedagogic practices, identities, and contexts. These include teacher research (see Loughran *et al.* 2002), practitioner inquiry (see Cochran-Smith

& Lytle 2004), action research (see Whitehead & McNiff 2006), critical pedagogy (see Giroux 1988), reflective practice (see Schön 1983) and reflective nostalgia (see Moletsane 2011). These approaches are consistent with recommendations made by the Higher Education Quality Committee of South Africa (HEQC) for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in Higher Education institutions by promoting and supporting educators' reflective self-evaluation (HEQC 2004) and by recognising and valuing the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer 1990; Scott *et al.* 2007). These approaches are also congruent with what Backhouse (2011) has identified as an emerging approach to doctoral education in South Africa, which she terms 'on-going personal development discourse' (33-35) and describes as 'an engagement with knowledge generation in the interests of on-going professional and personal development' (37). Backhouse argues that this approach, which 'acknowledges that people begin doctoral studies with different knowledge and abilities and emphasises that they will become scholars through the process' (36) is particularly appropriate in the South African context where students often begin their postgraduate studies 'at varying ages and career stages' (36). This is certainly the case with our TES staff-students.

Postgraduate Research Learning Communities

We share a belief that, to be effective supervisors of postgraduate research, we need to be lifelong learners – as such, modelling the behaviour we expect of our learner researchers. This is particularly significant when working within the relatively new methodological genre of self-study, as we comprise very experienced supervisors, particularly in the areas of the oral tradition of indigenous knowledge and feminist research (Conolly and Meyiwe), who are relatively new to self-study research, and also those who have recently completed PhDs using self-study methodologies (Pithouse-Morgan and Harrison), but are fairly new to supervising. Thus, we are all both novice and expert in some sense and the TES learning community has brought us together to learn from and with each other and our staff-students.

Higher Education literature reveals that postgraduate research and postgraduate research support are indeed important areas for educational research and development in South Africa and beyond. For example, the

ASSAf (2010) report on doctoral education in South African Higher Education institutions highlights the twin challenges of insufficient numbers of qualified and experienced supervisors and of novice supervisors not receiving sufficient or effective assistance to develop their supervisory capacity. The report also emphasises a growing awareness that the 'traditional apprenticeship model' of one-to-one supervision might not be the most effective way in which to support postgraduate research (64). This echoes a range of international literature that shows how collaborative and social approaches to postgraduate research supervision and research support can enhance research capacity, productivity and quality in Higher Education institutions (see, among others, Grevholm *et al.* 2005; Parker 2009; Wisker *et al.* 2003).

Interestingly, recent South African research (ASSAf 2010; Herman 2011) also suggests that part-time doctoral students who work full-time are more likely to succeed academically when their research is related directly to their own lives and work, as is the case with our staff-students who are undertaking self-study research. Indeed, Backhouse's work uncovered the differing expectations of doctoral students depending on field and culture and argued that success was related to ensuring that the doctoral study was supported by more 'intersecting contexts' than purely those provided by the university and the department (Backhouse 2009). Such a consideration of intersecting contexts is a large part of the TES research agenda, as is the development of an African researcher identity out of the process of postgraduate study (Harrison 2010).

As Grant puts it, part of the work of supervision pedagogy is the 'transformation of the student into an independent researcher … a relationship that engages student and supervisor/s in productive power relations' (Grant 2003:175). One of the significant implications of our work in TES, therefore, is that the supervisor has to engage and validate the staff-student's experience and authority rather than the other way around. We have found that when this dynamic is engaged in group settings, staff-students learn to challenge and validate colleagues' thinking, avoiding the kinds of tensions that arise where the supervisor is positioned as the sole authority (Sork & Chapman 1999; Chapman & Sork 2001, Bartlett & Mercer 2001; Grant 2005). The second lesson identified later in this article shows how we, as project-leaders, are learning to make spaces for this non-

hierarchical, democratic learning relationship (Boud & Lee 2005; Johnson *et al.* 2000).

Studying the TES Project

Methodological Approach

In keeping with our aim of developing a community of collaborative scholarship, our methodological approach to studying the TES project is collaborative inquiry. We are understand collaborative inquiry as a scholarly process in which co-inquirers work together to explore a research focus or question that is of common interest to them (see, for example, the work of Blair *et al.* 2011; Lapadat *et al.* 2010). Our collaborative inquiry approach is grounded in our reflexive ubuntu conceptual stance. For this article, our common focus of inquiry is our learning from the first year of the TES project.

Data Generation and Interpretation

As can be seen in the work of Blair *et al.* (2011) and others, collaborative inquirers work together, making use of a variety of usually qualitative methods, to generate and interpret research data. The methods that are used serve to elicit and bring into dialogue the co-scholars' varied voices, experiences and perspectives to facilitate 'polyvocality' (Blair *et al.* 2011:149).

The data sources for this article comprise 'digital log books' (Lunenberg *et al.* 2010:1282 - 1283) kept by TES participants, TES workshop evaluations, and our own personal reflections and communications. These different sources of research data have allowed us to gain diverse perspectives on the educational processes under investigation, and moreover, enhance the trustworthiness of our conclusion/s.

We drew the idea for the digital log books from Lunenberg *et al.* (2010). Our initial intention was to email TES participants, both supervisors and staff-students, six times per year, asking them to respond to a set of questions on their experience of the TES project activities. However, the slow response to our first call for digital logbook entries lead us to rethink

our strategy and we decided to only ask participants to complete one entry per year of the three year project. In the end, we received logbook entries from 10 out of 12 supervisors (including ourselves) and 14 out of 22 staff-students. We sent out the log book entry request after our first inter-institutional workshop in March 2011 and the responses we received were very helpful when planning our second workshop in July 2011.

We asked participants to complete an anonymous evaluation form at the end of each day of the inter-institutional workshops and we were more successful in collecting these responses from workshop participants than we had been with the digital logbooks. This was probably because we made time at the end of each day for participants to complete and return their evaluation forms, whereas the digital logbook entries required busy supervisors and staff-students to take time in their working days to complete them.

For this article, we are also drawing on our own personal reflections and communications as project-leaders, researchers and supervisors. These include our emails, notes from meetings and reflections we wrote and emailed to each other in preparation for conference and seminar presentations we have given on the TES project. We have been reviewing and discussing the log book entries and workshop evaluations as the project has progressed. Our analysis of the data has thus been an ongoing, collaborative and inductive process.

Ethics

In preparation for the TES project, we obtained ethical clearance from each of the three universities involved. Additionally all staff-students registered for self-study research applied for individual ethical clearance as per the regulations of the university in question. In line with the undertakings that we have made at each institution in order to obtain ethical clearance, the data represented in this article are used with the explicit consent of all involved. Indeed, the TES participants named in this article asked to be named, claimed to be honoured by our requests to quote them, took the opportunity to edit their responses and offered to write in more detail about their experiences. Importantly to us, the ethics of care and trust within friendships and community (Noddings 1995; Tillman-Healey 2003) demanded honouring the choice of each member of the TES group and the group as a whole with

regard to what is represented in this text with regard to their learnings, confidentiality and their identity.

Our reflexive ubuntu conceptual stance requires us to consider how we are (or are not) demonstrating an ethics of care and trust (Charles 2007, Covey 2006) in our roles as project-leaders, researchers and supervisors. We are aware that self-study research tends to be emotionally as well as intellectually challenging because, as Khau and Pithouse (2008:47) explain, it involves 'making one's self visible and thus vulnerable'. Hence, when one is undertaking this mode of research, and particularly when one is supervising students engaged in self-study research, there is a need to be prepared to deal with its emotional complexity in ways that are supportive and empathetic. However, 'space and time for paying attention to the emotionality of research' (Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* 2012:51) is often lacking. With this in mind, each of us created spaces in our universities to develop social and self-trust (Covey 2006). For example, TES participants at the University of Technology address this challenge through a voluntary, non-formal group called 'Mentoring Practitioner Researchers' (MPR) where, over a light lunch, participants discuss their latest challenges. Thus, we see making time and space for the emotional complexity of self-reflexive research as a key ethical requirement for our project.

Lessons Learned from the First Year of the TES Project

In this section, we draw on data generated from the first year of the TES project to identify and explain two 'lessons' that will guide us in going forward and that might be illuminating for others who are interested in supporting postgraduate research learning communities. We understand these lessons as a contingent and provisional set of ideas that will evolve with the project.

Lesson One: Take a Reflexive Ubuntu Approach to Funding

We have found that the development of an inter-institutional research learning community is greatly enhanced by face-to-face interaction among participants, particularly when some participants are situated in remote areas

and have difficulty in accessing technology for electronic communication. Face-to-face interaction, however, costs money. Hence, without funding, the TES project in its current form would not have been possible.

As is often the case, in our experience, the funds provided for the TES project were almost 75% less than we requested in the project proposal. However, we did not want to scale down our vision for the project and therefore, we looked for innovative ways to make our funding 'stretch' as far as possible. In this lesson, then, we demonstrate how our reflexive ubuntu stance made us open to reallocation of resources, learning from each other and enabling us to share resources easily.

Sharing Resources

The South African National Research Foundation (SA-NRF) provided the TES project with funding in two categories: Operations and Staff Development. We used the Operations budget to fund two three-day workshops for TES participants (and other interested academic staff and students). To make the workshops as inclusive as possible, we did not charge a registration fee and, therefore, we had to rely on the Operations budget. The Operations budget did not cover the cost of workshop venues at the current rates charged by the lead university as a source of third-stream income; therefore, we found a venue at a partnering institution that was free. Unpredictable events highlighted the 'untrustworthiness' of our current higher education institutional landscape, and emphasised the importance of the trust relationships within the TES community, when a convenient venue became inaccessible because of student unrest at this institution.

When the second workshop was moved, the catering contract was cancelled. At such short notice, self-catering was imperative. We found platters of sandwiches and snacks at a local supermarket at a fraction of the original cost. This will be the preferred catering mode in future, not only because of the reduced cost, but also because this arrangement accommodates the unpredictability of student unrest.

In summary, by sharing resources, we were able to afford two workshops for the TES participants and other interested colleagues, as well as an important project management team meeting at the end of 2011 to plan the way forward in 2012, all within a very limited Operations budget.

Self- and Social-Trust

In our original proposal, we requested funds for staff development support for a large number of staff-students employed at the partnering universities looking to improve their practice and qualifications. However, because the preferred funding practice of the SA-NRF is to provide large amounts to few students, we were allocated Staff Development grants for only three staff-students. After correspondence with the SA-NRF, we were granted a relaxation of the funding formulas, so that instead of larger amounts being paid directly by the SA-NRF to three nominated staff-students, the 2011 TES project was authorised to disburse smaller amounts to fund eight staff-students. This decision indicated that the NRF trusted the managers of the TES project to use and manage these public monies with due discrimination and discernment, and in keeping with the fiscal management requirements of the lead institution. These areas of responsibility relate directly to four core elements identified by Covey (2006:54-55) which we can use to measure trustworthiness: 'the first two cores deal with character; the second two with competence'. In respect of fiscal management, we quickly realised that we needed, as a team, to have a common understanding of our 'integrity, intent, capabilities and results' (Covey 2006:54-55) in respect of the public monies allocated to us. For our integrity to be regarded as trustworthy we had to ensure that these public monies were used as proposed and agreed - that we were 'walking our talk'. For our intent to be trustworthy, we had to ensure that our 'our agendas, and resulting behaviour' were 'straightforward and based on mutual benefit' (Covey 2006:54-55). For our capabilities to be trustworthy, we had to demonstrate that our performance inspired confidence and produced results, *viz.* 'our getting the right things done' (Covey 2006:54-55).

We used the TES funding to address some identifiable inequities. TES staff-students from less-well-resourced universities were able to use their funding to purchase specialist books and equipment not available at their institutions. Staff-students have also used the funding to pay for 'teaching relief' so that they have time to concentrate on their studies. Herman (2011) draws attention to how the demands of teaching can impede the progress of full-time academic staff who are engaged in postgraduate studies, particularly where teaching timetables are demanding. In the case of

self-study for improved professional practice, where the research is focused on the researcher's own teaching, this challenge is ameliorated, but time to focus on writing is still urgently needed.

To the credit of the TES team, TES 2011 spent 98% of the funds allocated for 2011, with all procedures in place. This success can be attributed to the trustworthiness, in Covey's (2006) terms, of dedicated, well-informed, disciplined and efficient personnel, which the TES project was, and is, fortunate to have. TES is also fortunate that the fiscal procedures of the lead institution have a track record of public trustworthiness, so that TES can be reasonably sure that auditing procedures will show that the fiscal affairs of the TES project are in order. We anticipate that TES's disciplined trustworthy fiscal behaviour will encourage the funders to extend and /or award further funding in the future.

Lesson 2: Create an Enabling, Reflexive Ubuntu Space

The financial flexibility granted us by the SA-NRF contributed to the creation of an enabling environment for us and, by extension, our supervisor and staff-student participants. We have learned that projects such as TES are enabled by a positive attitude from all, including, significantly, those who provide the administrative, bureaucratic, public relations and fiscal services.

Our aim through TES activities was to provide a welcoming learning space that allows and appreciates everyone, especially newcomers and those who have little knowledge about self-study of practice, without the often constraining disciplinary limits. Our reflexive ubuntu stance demands that individuals be recognised, acknowledged and allowed to be themselves in totality. At TES we are about 'seeing' and hearing the participant in terms of her/his values, identities and environment. This position appears to have borne fruit.

Ongoing Personal Development

Through regular meetings of peer researchers curiously asking questions about how one knows the things one knows and why it matters, ontological shifts occur as both supervisors and students reposition themselves (Bartlett

& Mercer 2001; Harrison 2007) in order to address their questions about their practice. This locates our projects under the TES umbrella in the 'ongoing personal development' discourse, which as Backhouse (2011) points out, is most likely to be aligned with the South African post-graduate student's self-positioning as generally more mature than postgraduate students in say, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America. As illustrated in the following reflection by Liz, participants find their voices and start to believe that they can be researchers:

> I have observed the transforming effect of people working in a 'safe space' populated with a circle of trusted critical friends. I have watched confidence grow and impact not only on professional practice but also on personal and domestic lives, and even the lives of colleagues and families.

Thus, coming to be a researcher means taking on a new identity (Bartlett & Mercer 2000; Fataar 2005; Harrison 2010). Learning to think rigorously and to challenge one's own beliefs and prejudices in a supportive group enables new researchers to reposition themselves (Harré &Van Langehhove 1999) comfortably in their field, their research and their lifeworld (their contexts as described by McAlpine & Norton 2006 and Backhouse 2009 respectively). This insider-outsider perspective demonstrates the aliveness of the ubuntu ideal that 'I am because we are'.

Inclusivity

TES employs multidisciplinary and innovative approaches to research and presenting research products. In this way, it is inclusive of methodologies. Within the self-study frame, multiple methods, for example, oral history, photo-voice, autoethnography, biography, are possible to answer the questions that arise as the research unfolds. Multiple methods and fields of expertise offer multiple perspectives and ways of conceptualising and undertaking research. TES participants highlight the value of being exposed to a range of innovative and creative methods and of dialoguing with people from diverse fields and specialisations:

> I have found great value in meeting other people from diverse research fields at the … meetings (and … workshops), where personal and professional experiences, thoughts and practices are shared … Being part of MPR facilitates me in seeing the benefits of coming together as a group. I take many of the experiences of this group into my classroom (Liza du Plessis, TES staff-student).

> As a potential researcher, Self-Study has made research accessible; one does not always have to use big words to have a valuable study (Sibongile Madi, TES staff-student).

The appreciation expressed by staff-students is echoed by two supervisors – one a novice in self-study methodologies and the other a novice in supervision. Theresa's words speak to the safety of the spaces created to accommodate a diversity of students /staff:

> As a potential supervisor using self-study, I see it (TES) as extremely valuable. [I'm] still learning the ropes and hoping to be able to put it to good use, soon. It seems many of our postgraduate student-staff would make faster progress with this approach than is the case at present (Theresa Chisanga, TES supervisor).

Chris finds a similar thread relating to discipline and field diversity, saying:

> … I am trying to identify the aspects of self that are influencing/directing my creative practice of making jewellery and related 'art'-efacts, so that I can engage more fruitfully with my students and their creative practices (Chris de Beer, TES supervisor).

And, as project-leaders we have found that we consider the space for individuation and self-expression a necessary part of our reflexive ubuntu stance, and it has had powerful effects in validating non-mainstream ways of knowing:

> I have learned that self-study provides spaces for people to grow in

> unexpected and unanticipated ways. They surprise themselves, quite apart from anyone else (Joan Conolly).

> [A challenge is] helping students to gain confidence that they know something about their life worlds and to articulate it…and to make the connection between their own knowing and what already exists in the community of scholars (Liz Harrison).

> Knowing that there is a community that holds similar values and does what I do has been encouraging.…Also participating in the list-serve networks as well as receiving from time-to time supporting and encouraging news and literature – has served as both a support mechanism and is of great value to me (Thenjiwe Meyiwe).

> For me, the TES project is about the intrinsic joy of learning together – something which often seems to get lost in our day-to-day struggles to meet externally imposed ‘performance criteria’ and yet is fundamental to what we do as educators and researchers (Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan).

We are delighted that in working together in the TES community, staff-students are able to express their creativity and concerns whilst resisting the institutional pressures which arguably ‘norm’ research.

Joy, Excitement and Passion

As highlighted by Kathleen’s comment above, TES staff-students and supervisors report feeling stimulated by and enjoying the interaction with colleagues from their own and other institutions. The interaction brings about a sense of belonging, a longing not to disappoint and in turn an ethos of passion. Appreciating the support, a staff-student captures the ethos when she acknowledges:

> It has been of such phenomenal value that without this support I do not think I will manage to complete my study (Anita Hiralaal, TES staff-student).

There is a palpable excitement and passion among the participants. At seminars and workshops, there is always hunger to share each other's stories and recent classroom experiences, which leads to these sessions taking far longer than scheduled and expected. It becomes very hard to contain the excitement, which in turn expresses itself in the rich data found in the students' writing. It becomes necessary to point this out as, in relation to other students that are under our supervision – that is those that are not enrolled for self-study projects – getting them to adhere to regular submission schedules can be a battle. Thus, supervisors draw attention to increased self-motivation of students:

> Students' excitement and passion about their work astounds me. In my 17 years of supervising students, I do not recall – not once, having such students, who are genuinely interested and eager about their studies (Thenjiwe Meyiwe).

We attribute the motivation to the fact that the staff-students themselves are a key component of their own studies. As their studies are about their work – in particular, about bringing a positive change in what they do – interest levels are high and so is the urge to succeed. Reflecting on his work responsibility and the use of the pronouns 'I' and 'my' in his writing, Nkosinathi Sotshangane, a TES staff-student, explains that it:

> ... shifts the focus of my research from observer to active participant but more importantly, it places the responsibility on myself to conduct research on educational practice to derive understanding and meaning of my own practice and to add new knowledge.

Going Public and Moving Forward with the TES Project

At the conference presentation that foreshadowed this article, members of the audience asked:

- What have been the interpersonal challenges experienced so far, e.g., power relations, hierarchies, inclusion/exclusion and so on?

- Did the supervisors all know each other beforehand? How did they trust each other enough to share experiences?
- What have been the unintended consequences of the project?

Our response to these questions, as with the two lessons we have identified through the process of the first year of TES, can be summarised in a particular way of being that we have endeavoured to establish within the project, in keeping with our reflexive ubuntu stance. We have found the TES project more than we could have hoped for in a research project. Being able to work hard at what we truly believe in has been a great joy. Observing the growing interest in the project and what it implies for professional development in Higher Education has been most encouraging. TES is contributing to the generation of critical research methodology knowledge, advancing/demonstrating new scholarship and production of postgraduate students – per the urgent demand of the Department of Higher Education and Training. In turn, staff-students are actively researching, producing publications and will consequently increase the number of supervisors of Higher Degrees – collaboratively. A delightful unintended consequence has been our collective joy and curiosity, which positions our work in stark contrast to the dispassionate, scientific activity associated with the stereotype of research.

Interestingly, sharing the TES project at internal institutional fora, such as faculty boards and departmental meetings, has been more challenging than at external fora, such as national and international conferences and seminars, where the notion has, more often than not, been enthusiastically welcomed. Meeting other self-study researchers at conferences and seminars has been encouraging and enriching. Finally, observing the growth and development in us all has been simultaneously empowering and humbling. We are aware of the dangers of over-confidence and other complexities. Whether the trust relationships described can be translated into formal post-graduate cohort support systems (a reflexive ubuntu academe?) remains open and is something that the project hopes to explore in the coming two years.

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Liz Harrison
Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, DUT
lizh@dut.ac.za

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan
Development Studies
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
pithousemorgan@ukzn.ac.za

Joan Conolly
Associate-Professor (Retired)
Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
Durban University of Technology
conollyj@dut4life.ac.za

Thenjiwe Meyiwa
Research Director: HSRC
Education and Skills Development Programme
Honorary Professor UKZN.
tmeyiwa@hsrc.ac.za

Corresponding Author:
Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan
Address: School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal
Edgewood Campus
Private Bag X03, Ashwood, 3605, South Africa
Tel: 031-2603460 / 084 027 5991
Pithousemorgan@ukzn.ac.za