

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

Summary of article

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan *
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

I teach graduate courses in the specialisation of Teacher Development Studies at a university in South Africa. My students are teachers who teach in a range of subject areas at primary and secondary schools. 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 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. In this article, I make visible a process of exploring professional learning through poetry, using myself as subject. I invite readers to journey with me as I use found poetry to come to terms with my struggle to engage in a generative way with students' written memory stories of physically and emotionally painful experiences at the hands of their former teachers. 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. The article reveals how, through found poetry, I gained a heightened awareness of struggle as a valuable element of professional learning. It also shows my evolving understanding of the necessity and complexity of revisiting the past with the aim of stimulating professional learning – especially in contexts that bear legacies of prolonged, painful and divisive political conflict and repression. Drawing on observations and recommendations from studies done in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, I 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. I propose a deliberate and widespread integration of creative and therapeutic pedagogic approaches in pre-service teacher education and continuing teacher professional development with the aim of establishing healthy and healing classroom environments in schools, universities and other spaces where teacher and teacher educator learning happen. To conclude, I consider how creating found poetry afforded me insights that I might not otherwise have been able to access.