

Poetic Self-Study Scholarship for Compassion, Collegiality and Community

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Self-study emerged in the early 1990s as a self-reflexive research methodology and scholarly community focused on developing professional practice and knowledge in teacher education. It has since expanded across disciplines to address complex issues in higher education. Poetry has long played a role in self-study and is gaining popularity as a method of inquiry. Building on this momentum, we analysed ten recent poetic self-studies to explore how and why teacher educators use this approach to foster compassion, collegiality, and community. The analysis took the form of a close reading, guided by our research question. Our reading of the ten self-studies reveals how the purposeful choice to employ poetic research methods can engender empathy, generative resistance, and productive action in higher education. Weaving poetry into self-study is more than a stylistic choice; it is a strategy for personal and social change and a challenge to reductive narratives about higher education.

Full paper

Aims and Context

Poetic inquiry enriches educational research by offering expressive, imaginative ways to explore and represent lived experiences. Through distinctive forms, imagery, and rhythms, poetic language shapes how knowledge is constructed, recognised, and communicated (Leggo, 2008).

We are South African teacher educators who collaborate to develop poetic scholarship in diverse contexts. In this paper, we explore the role of poetry in self-study—a research

methodology and scholarly community that emerged in teacher education in the early 1990s to support professional growth through self-reflexive engagement with practice. Now embedded in higher education, self-study provides a generative framework for examining academic practice, work, and cultures across disciplines (Kitchen, 2020).

Poetry has long served as a powerful mode of self-study, illuminating academia's emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions. Recent research identifies poetic inquiry as the most widely used form of arts-based self-study (Butler & Horton, 2024), underscoring its growing relevance. While grounded in teacher education, poetic self-study offers insights for challenging dominant discourses, reimagining relationships, and supporting professional learning across higher education.

This study asks: *How and why do teacher educators use poetic self-study to foster compassion, collegiality, and community?*

Our focus on teacher educators reflects their pivotal role in shaping poetic self-study within higher education. Positioned at the intersection of teaching, research, and leadership, teacher educators are deeply engaged with questions of practice, ethics, and transformation—making them well-placed to contribute to wider conversations about compassion, collegiality, and community in academic life.

Data Sources and Methodology

We selected ten poetic self-studies published since 2020, representing diverse global contexts and perspectives. Our criteria focused on educators using poetry to improve educational experiences and equity.

Table 1: Teacher Educators' Poetic Self-Studies for Compassion, Collegiality, and Community

	Authors	Year of publication	Primary geographical location	Poetic genre	Remedy, repair, and renewal
1	Buchanan, Mills, & Mooney	2020 Castle	United States	Bricolage poetry	Exploring how teacher educators negotiate the tensions between promoting social justice and equity and the neoliberal context in which they live and work.
2	Gísladóttir & Óskarsdóttir	2020 Castle	Iceland	Erase poetry	Mobilising teachers' diverse experiences and perspectives to build a framework for multicultural teacher education in ways that prioritise equity and justice.
3	Edge & Olan	2021	United States	Found poetry	Developing understandings to disrupt and problematise teacher educators' positionality and teaching practice.
4	Mbatha et al.	2021	South Africa	Found poetry	Confronting the marginalisation of early career Black academics and creating alternative academic spaces to value intersectional experiences.
5	McDonough	2022	Australia	Found poetry	Representing embodied, emotive aspects of identity development; sharing authentic experiences and understandings of identity amidst personal and institutional tensions.
6	Nishida	2022	Japan - Iceland	Haiku	Using Haiku as a culturally responsive way to respond to Japanese students' critical reflection needs; exploring the value of cultural resources for pedagogical innovations.
7	Van Laren & Masinga	2022	South Africa	Tanka; found poetry	Combating stigma and indifference surrounding HIV and AIDS; helping and preparing teachers affected by HIV and AIDS.
8	Acosta et al.	2023	United States	A poly-voiced Greek play with poetry threading throughout the play	Investigating vulnerable self and professional identity as teacher educators and research scholars imbued with the philosophy of transformative learning.
9	Kortjass & Mkhize-Mthembu	2023	South Africa	Pantoum poetry	Understanding ways to support students and address their diverse needs; teacher-educator collaboration to reimagine and reshape teaching and learning in the post-COVID-19 era.
10	Sosa-Provencio et al.	2023 Castle	United States	Tapestry poetry	Using <i>Testimonio</i> to connect teacher educators and students across differences to promote common humanity and provide rich, life-giving learning environments.

Guided by Ohrvik's (2024) "conscious close reading"—a deliberate engagement with language and context—we compiled notes with verbatim excerpts on the authors' intentions, settings, rationales, and impacts. These informed our interpretation of patterns in compassion, collegiality, and community, advancing understandings of poetic inquiry in higher education.

Findings: Close Reading Themes

Poetic self-study fosters *compassion* through empathetic engagement with personal and shared struggles. Mbatha et al. (2021) described how poetry supported resilience and self-compassion amid academic marginalisation. McDonough (2022) used the tactile, iterative process of assembling poems to explore leadership tensions. Kortjass and Mkhize-Mthembu (2023) co-wrote a poem expressing frustration and growth in teaching during the COVID-19 era. These studies show how poetry enables educators to confront institutional and social challenges with emotional insight.

Collegiality is fostered through collaborative poetic practices, welcoming diverse voices and shared meaning-making. Gísladóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2020) created a dialogic space for educators to co-create poems and sculptures, promoting inclusion. Sosa-Provenica et al. (2023) assembled a tapestry poem from cut-out strips—symbolising hope and resistance through co-creation. Edge and Olan (2021) described poetry as a dialogic space for negotiated meaning. Van Laren and Masinga (2022) combined poetry and letter writing to prompt change. Acosta et al. (2023) used a transdisciplinary, multi-voiced approach to foster dialogue among educators, showing how collegiality supports individual and

collective learning. These examples show how poetic self-study fosters relational spaces for dialogue, solidarity, and growth.

Community emerges as educators move from private insight to shared inquiry, where personal stories are voiced and woven into collective meaning. Buchanan et al. (2020) illustrated how poetry enabled colleagues to confront marginalisation and build solidarity by sharing experiences. Nishida (2022) used poetry as a cultural lens, showing how drawing on personal heritage helps educators articulate and examine practice. These examples show how poetic self-study nurtures responsive professional communities grounded in empathy, creativity, and connection—and how these networks can bridge higher education with wider groups, especially those historically excluded.

Collectively, these studies show how poetic self-study helps educators reimagine roles and relationships within and beyond higher education.

Scholarly Significance

Poetic self-study is more than a stylistic choice; it is a powerful academic and professional practice, enabling educators to express complex emotional, cultural, and political aspects of their work. Through compassion, collegiality, and community, poetic inquiry surfaces experiences of exclusion, belonging, and resistance, offering insight into academic life's broader challenges and possibilities for growth.

Poetry also expands what counts as knowledge, who can produce it, and how it is shared. The ten studies show how poetic engagement—through writing, performance, and reflexivity—can prompt ethical action and critique. This form of inquiry holds generative potential across disciplines, offering higher education creative ways to reclaim public narratives, resist reductive policy framings, and reaffirm academic values grounded in kindness, care, and justice.