Recreating a Graduate Supervisor through Art Making

An Autoethnographic Study

INTRODUCTION

What happens when we use artful methods to turn our gaze onto the autobiographic self of the graduate supervisor? How do pathways of self-inquiry change? And for whom? What self-knowledge do those paths engender? In my arts-based research scholarship, I have examined how visual and literary art forms open up imaginative spaces for self-reflexivity and complex ways of thinking and being.1 Art-making can serve as imaginative entry points to awaken creative, materially situated, and practical modes for researching supervision pedagogy in higher education. Visual modes like drawing, painting, sculpture, and collage can employ the powers of creativity to know the self in surprising ways.2 According to Pahl, Roswell, Bartlett, and Vasudevan3 (2010), the visual offers space where personal, untold stories can be experienced and expressed materially and practically—and space for “unknowing.”4 taken-for-granted notions of the supervisor self. As South Africans, we can use visual modes as an ethical practice to “[look] the beast of the [apartheid] past in the eye . . . in order not to allow it to imprison us.”5 Twenty-five years into our democracy, we continue to experience the residues of brutal, racist apartheid rule. The beast of the past lingers and, as higher education teachers and students in South Africa, we continue to experience the effects of decades of intellectual, social, and cultural impoverishment of education.

Knowing the self through emotion and body,6 within the realm of autoethnography, provides new insights into the stories of everyday lived experience. In this article, I show how working with artworks I composed facilitated a different understanding of my supervision pedagogy. Visual modes, as inquiry and representation for autoethnographic research, offered potent possibilities for cultivating a different understanding of supervision pedagogy in South African public higher education institutions.
The year 1994 marked critical changes in South African higher education. Universities were steered by a vision of a democratic, anti-sexist, and anti-racist system of higher education— with promise of more equitable access, participation, and graduation rates.7 However, higher education in South Africa also endorsed the corporate, managerial approaches adopted in universities internationally.8 These global imperatives have engineered how academics negotiate their everyday lives and teaching in higher education. The corporatized enterprise has occasioned the drive to intensify graduate student numbers and accelerate graduate student throughput, which has, in turn, contributed to work intensification, dangerous forms of competition, and a culture of individualism.9 Graduate education as a form of commodification, massification, and “product with measurable outputs,” rather than “a process of personal transformation”10 is thus at risk of compromise through workload pressures on academics to meet specific numerical targets.11

It was within this context that I turned to autoethnographic research to experience my life and work with graduate students as a social and ethical space. It was my desire to be present and to act with care for different voices, perspectives, and truths as a way to enliven graduate research learning experiences for creative knowledge. Such work cannot be quantified in units or outputs arranged hierarchically.

**THE RESEARCHER’S GAZE**

Thinking and working autoethnographically meant I could foreground self as principal object of the researcher’s gaze—to understand my supervisor self autobiographically, personally, and socially.12 However, I intuitively knew that “writing was not enough”13 to open up and capture the meanings and traces of my self in order to bring to life connections to my supervisor positionality, and to discover alternate ways of thinking and doing research supervision.

Methodological associations became critical—for over thirty years I have variously been an art teacher in a public schools and university academic settings drawing on arts-based research methods. How might my subjective, embodied experiences, desires, emotions, and interests in art as a way of knowing serve as an entry point to mediate this autoethnographic research? Turning to autoethnography and “art [a]s a way of knowing”14 as methodological lenses connected my “knowledge from and about the body.”15 The visual images I painted evolved from my writing and research as a supervisor for over a decade16—they offered me ideas that I have presented in poetic form as commentary to accompany the visual imagery. These autoethnographic spaces as materially situated practice17 enabled me to work “between resistance and oppression”18 and to engage in curious, creative thinking about doing research supervision differently.

**ENFLESHMENTS OF ETHICAL SELF-CARE**

The ever-shifting visual arrangements presented below offered me a way to experiment, to create something that affirmed the autoethnographic project I was engaging in. These
visual experiments of truth\textsuperscript{19}—as inquiry and as an affirmative, ethical practice for the ensemble of my supervisor life are now presented as three visual artworks.

\textit{Visual 1: A reflexive glance?}

Supervisor shift!

Transitions discomforting . . .

A reflexive glance?

Give up comforting meanings . . .

Care! Lively mutual respect!

\textit{Visual 2: Openness}

Stand

Step-back

Look again

Brilliant color

Free

\textit{Visual 3: Find their own voices}

Freeing up students!

Pedagogy looks different . . .

Find their own voices.

Shifts between students–me!

Openness, Ambiguity . . .
Visual texts as inquiry and representation served as my lifeline—assisting me to step back, reflect, and open up to the mysteries that lie beyond my conscious meaning-making. Writing the poems through my visual creations was a quest to make meaningful autobiographical connections that opened up my positionality as supervisor to different truths: the power of the visual to bring to the surface other voices\textsuperscript{20} to affirm the person in the graduate supervisor as a practice of ethical care. The visual and poetic modes offered me ways to awaken the importance of the personal, and to enflesh my supervisor position responsibly as care for other:

*My shifts* . . .

Step-back, look again!

Give up comforting meanings . . .

Find . . . their own voices

Openness . . . Ambiguity

Shifts between, students–me.

**CONCLUSION**

In this article I have highlighted autoethnographic research as possibility for giving up comforting meanings and opening up supervision spaces to ambiguous shifts. Imaginatively repositioning self and freeing up students through this inquiry became possible because it considers methods and strategies by which “an individual can make of herself an object to be known” differently.\textsuperscript{21} To effect transformation of myself into an ethical, reflective subject as supervisor, from where I could “learn the art of living [supervision]”\textsuperscript{22} as research-rich, contextualized conversations, I have highlighted how autoethnographic enfleshments as arts-based modes provided me productive ways for resisting fixed, disembodied ways of enacting supervision practices to graduate students viewed as product-oriented outputs.

Autoethnographic writing and research invited transgressive, embodied practices from which to think supervisor self anew through the adoption of “multifocal lenses”\textsuperscript{23} Reconfiguring supervisor positionality in order to achieve “new kinds of existence”\textsuperscript{24} invited creative, materially situated practices to see self as the main source of transformation for an enactment of ethical care to self and others.

Art-making and writing autoethnography provided me tangible, creative ways to search and research the subjective self and, from this material and practice-based understanding, supervision pedagogy looked different: mutually respected, caring, lively, and of brilliant color. The visual imagery and my possible interpretations materialized a rich assemblage of ideas that offer fertile ground for thoughtful experiments and to generate new ways of conceptualizing what it means to fascinate explicitly research learning in my supervision meetings:

- Changed, meeting space!
- Reflective, transformative . . .
Contextualized!
Rich, research conversations . . .
Fascinate explicitly!

NOTES
6. Allen, Art Is a Way.

