

## **How does self study influence practitioners to improve their practice?**

### **Some critical reflections on self study's transformative potential**

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**Abstract :** Sixteen years after the democratic elections in South Africa, the higher education sector is still deeply troubled, and characterised by a lack of transformation of the curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment practices, depressingly low throughput in both the undergraduate and post graduate sectors. Educators in the higher education sector bemoan the ‘underpreparedness’ of the incoming students, who are themselves deeply dissatisfied. Simultaneously, employers in all sectors are registering concern about the lack of relevant and usable skills and workplace capacities in graduates, and the rate of unemployment is rising. Clearly this is an untenable situation. Following Einstein’s injunction that “Insanity consists of doing things in the same way and expecting a different outcome”, we at DUT have instituted an action research self study program in the hope that this will break the logjam, and float our under- and post-graduate students down the river of success.

In this paper, I report the purpose, the aims, and some of the beliefs, values and strategies employed in the Self Study for Transformative Higher Education and Social Action (SeStuTHESA) project at DUT. I will share what I see happening in the group. I will report on my awareness as facilitator and leader of the group, and how I am attempting to improve my practice. I will also share instances of success and achievement. (220 words)

### **Introduction**

At the outset, I record that this paper is the result of two questions that Professor Jack Whitehead asked me in December, 2009 when he was visiting the Durban University of Technology for the first time.

Over supper on the evening after the first full-day workshop, Jack said something like “In all my years of teaching all over the world, this is the first time that I have experienced such an intense concentration of such sincerely dedicated and creative teachers. To what do you ascribe this?” I was completely nonplussed. But after a moment, I said “I suppose that this could be because we have always had to work with the odds stacked against us, and I think that this has made us all draw on our inner capacities in order to succeed and have our learners succeed. We have had to be creative and innovative. We have HAD to find a way because there was no alternative.” The more I think about that response, and the longer I work with the teachers in SeStuTHESA, the more convinced I am of the truth of my response. The teachers

who choose to be part of SeStuTHESA are a constant inspiration to me. They choose to look consistently for ways to improve their practice. At DUT we often teach very large classes of first generation higher education learners from severely impoverished communities which are seriously affected by the Aids pandemic, and teach as many as 30 hours contact per week. I have written this paper with this question, and the teachers who attend SeStuTHESA in mind.

Jack asked his second question in a fifteen minute interview at the end of the week-long visit. “To what do you attribute your educational influence, Joan?” I had no idea how to answer him then, and have been thinking about it ever since. This paper is my first attempt to answer this question in writing. As I have thought, reflected and written, I have realized how significant Jack’s question was/is, not just for me, but for all who seek to improve what they are doing as teachers in the SeStuTHESA group at DUT.

### **What has influenced/ influences my educational practice?**

The most significant constant in the context of this paper has its origins in my very early experience as a teacher. I found that there was a significant gap between what I taught and what my learners learned. I found this deeply distressing, and came to the conclusion that I was a poor teacher, and that this deficiency was peculiar to me. I decided that it was only fair to my learners to stop teaching. As a sole breadwinner and single parent to my son, I could not contemplate not working and not earning a living, and as education was all I knew (or thought I knew), I accepted an offer to manage a department in a school, which I did quite successfully for 10 years. This was a significant experience in many ways, but most importantly I found very quickly that many of the teachers I managed experienced the same ‘gap’ that I had – particularly those most effective and dedicated. Repeatedly, they would come to me after the public examination results were known, and say, deeply puzzled and distressed - “But, Joan, I taught him/her that.” I then realized that I was not alone in my dilemma, that ‘there is a gap between what I teach and what my learners learn’. I began to ask “Why do my learners not learn what I teach them?” “What are my learners doing/thinking/feeling when I am teaching them, that they are not learning what I am teaching them?” “Are my learners learning something other than what I am teaching them?” And as I asked these questions, it became clear to me that there were many factors other than those in the classroom that were playing a part in the minds of my learners when I was teaching them. These factors included their relationships at home and among their friends, socio-economic issues, and political and health issues. It was clear that in the majority of cases, the children I was teaching had more important work to do with their intelligence, awareness and emotional capacities than learn for my next test! In the five contexts in which I had taught up until that point, I could identify a number of critical factors which were impacting significantly on the learning of my - and my staff members’ - learners outside the

classroom, and outside the educational institution. I started to ask: “Do I learn what my teachers teach me? Or do I learn ‘something else’? If I am learning ‘something else’, what is this ‘something else’ and why do I learn *that*, and *not* what my teachers teach me?” I suspected that ‘understanding learning’ was key to solving this conundrum, and so examining what learning is, and how it happens, and does not happen, has significantly preoccupied my educational journey ever since.

In all the years of my teaching, but particularly in the ten years preceding the 1994 democratic elections, I remember so clearly the excited anticipation of a single national department of education providing education equal in every way to all the citizens of South Africa. It was a heady expectation. In the sixteen years since the 1994 elections, we have been challenged, and continue to be challenged, by problems that seem insuperable. In hindsight, in our pre-democratic election expectations, did we sufficiently factor in the HIV/Aids pandemic and foresee its impact on the national economy, the cost of health care, unemployment, consequent poverty, and the ‘widening of the gap’ between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’? Were we sufficiently aware of how many suitably qualified teachers and researchers we needed in the higher education sector to accommodate the call for the massification of higher education? Were we prepared for the extent of violence, crime and corruption that has complicated and drained the material, intellectual, emotional and spiritual energies of our post apartheid state? Did we consider the extent and impact of ongoing violence in the African and international arenas, and the millions of fugitives seeking comparative safety and security in South Africa? Could we anticipate 9/11 in USA, its impact on the global relations and economies, the collapse of the powerhouse economies, and their impact on our activities in higher education in South Africa?

The bottom line is that in spite of well-informed and -planned strategies and interventions, undergraduate throughput continues to be dismal, and the students themselves, their parents and their (would be) employers, are dissatisfied with the education that we are providing. Within the university, I hear constantly that the learners are ‘underprepared’, and then I hear about yet another strategy or intervention to ‘prepare’ the students for higher education. When I examine the latest intervention or strategy, I am inclined to conclude that each one is very little more than a re-formation of what was there before, with a new ‘label’ attached. Given the continued poor throughput in spite of all these interventions, clearly this is not enough. I also subscribe to the Einstein-ian dictum that ‘doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different outcome defines insanity’. So what more can we do? What can we do differently? What needs to change? Who needs to change? In Jack Whitehead’s words, “How can I improve my practice ...?”

***What has influenced/ influences my practice as an academic developer?***

All of the above, and more, inform my current daily reality in academic development at the Durban University of Technology. I continuously ask myself ...

“How can we, simultaneously, raise both the under-graduate and postgraduate throughputs  
in a newly merged university of technology  
where the teachers have heavy teaching loads,  
with high learner-teacher ratios,  
and where the learner profile is highly diverse in every way imaginable,  
in the context of an infant democracy,  
high rates of unemployment  
rampant poverty  
and the HIV/Aids pandemic?”

My attempts to answer this complex question are informed by a number of factors.

***How have/do ‘orality-literacy’ perspectives influence/d my practice?***

In 2001, I visited the Arran Islands where I saw the drystone walls of Inis Mean, and the megalithic tombs of the Boyne Valley, both for the first time<sup>1</sup>. When I considered what I was looking at, I realized that these drystone constructions demonstrated significantly sophisticated applications of scientific principles even by modern and current standards. I also realized that both of these phenomena, but particularly the latter, had occurred in the absence of scribal alphabetic writing. I also found myself realizing the contemptuous effects of familiarity, first in the casual disregard of the local people of the sophisticated engineering evident in both of these constructions. And then, with shame, of my own casual disregard of their equivalents in my home region in KwaZuluNatal particularly in the beadwork, basketry, ceramics and house- and homemaking capacities of the Zulu people. I found the case of the Zulu women particularly significant as many were living in communities in rural areas where the education provided for them during their formative years was, and continues to be, a matter of deep shame. In short, these were human beings who had benefited little if at all from formal education, good or bad. They knew little if any English - the global lingua franca, they did not read and write in scribal alphabetic ways – not even in Zulu, they had not been privy to the formal teaching of numbers and numeracy, they had no access to the digital highway provided by computers, and they had little if any access to the benefits of employment where training could be provided. They were, and still largely are, excluded from those capacities which constitute an open sesame to privilege and advantage. And yet they were demonstrating in their so-called ‘craft’, all the applied engineering capacities of the megalithic tomb builders in Ireland of 5000 years ago,

and of modern engineering and geometry. I consider these women, and their capacities, remarkable, and worthy of considerable educational preoccupation and investigation. In 2007, I met Professor Paulus Gerdes of the Centre for African Science and Mozambican Studies who has, over the last 38 years, demonstrated the mathematical processes effected in basketry from all over the world in more than 70 publications in 7 languages. This basketry is the product of people like the Zulu women of KwaZuluNatal in that they infrequently have had the benefit of education to any significant degree, yet they consistently demonstrate mathematical competences that a university professor of mathematics might envy.

As a result of my 2001 experiences and reflections in Ireland, I formulated the following research questions, which have been reinforced by my subsequent experiences, and which have influenced my work since then:

1. Given that we are told that complex and sophisticated thinking is impossible without scribal alphabetic writing, how do we account for evidence to the contrary?
2. How do we bring the complex and sophisticated thinking of indigenous knowledge into the academy ON ITS OWN TERMS?

These two questions are critical to my understanding of human learning for they focus on human learning, and its ontological consequences, in the absence of scribal alphabetic writing, and for this understanding I am indebted to Marcel Jousse's explication of these matters in *The Oral Style* (1990), *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm* (2000), *The Parallel Rhythmic Recitatives of the Rabbis of Israel* (2001), *Memory, Memorisation, and Memorisers in Ancient Galilee* (2001), *Holism and Education* (2004), *The Fundamentals of Human Expression and Communication* (2006), *Be Your Self!* (2009), the influence of the supervisor of my studies in orality-literacy, Edgard Sienaert, the students whose studies of orality-literacy I have supervised, and my own investigations in this field of studies (Conolly, 1996, & 2001).

### ***How have/do 'Wholistic' and 'Holistic' Education influence/d my practice?***

I have long been preoccupied with the notions of Wholistic Education and Holistic Education.

I am conscious always of the meaning of the word 'education', and take my lead from Jousse:

To be fit to guide the development of the whole human being, without deforming or impoverishing him, it is necessary that the teacher be experientially aware of all the learner's underlying anthropological 'potentialities', which seek the opportunity to blossom forth. This is precisely the role of the educator: to make them blossom forth, to 'lead out from within' = *ex ducere*." (Jousse 2004:16)

I have learned about ‘Wholistic Education’ from friends and colleagues among the First Nations people of Ontario, where I have been privileged to visit since 2003. Diane Hill and her colleagues argue that the ‘western’ version of education – *Mens sana in corpore sano*<sup>ii</sup> - often translated as "A sound mind in a sound body"<sup>iii</sup> - only educates our physical and mental capacities. The First Nations people, however, require that education should inform the physical, the mental, the emotional and the spiritual capacities of learners: this is understood to constitute wholistic education.

My understanding of holistic human learning has also been significantly informed by my explorations of the oral traditions of knowledge, of how human beings pass their learning on – *tradere*<sup>iv</sup> – from generation to generation, both in performance, and in forms of fixed expression, viz. in both oral and literate ways. This preoccupation - which began, I now realize, as a child - informed my decision to study Orality-Literacy Studies for a masters and doctoral degree, between in 1993 and 2000, and this influence is ongoing. Marcel Jousse exhorts us to educate the whole and holistic indivisible human being (Jousse, 2004).

I am fascinated by the notion of ‘holism’ as conceptualized by Jan Christiaan Smuts (1987), namely that wholes are self-organising systems, which have an innate capacity to develop and evolve energetically in a process which he identifies as ‘holism’, namely that when a structure develops to the point where its innate energies challenge its prevailing structure, it breaks out of the prevailing structure, goes through a process of ‘chaos’ and then reorganizes itself in a new, different and evolved structure. Smuts is at pains to point out that the highpoint of holism is the holistic human personality (Smuts, 1987: chapters X and XII).

I am also fascinated by the insights of Fritjof Capra (1997) that the world is a web of integrated matter, and that all the energies of the universe interact, so that all is included and nothing is irrelevant. I am further fascinated by Patricia Burchat’s demonstration that the smallest and the largest particles of the universe behave in much the same way, and continue to grow and evolve and change [http://www.ted.com/talks/patricia\\_burchat\\_leads\\_a\\_search\\_for\\_dark\\_energy.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/patricia_burchat_leads_a_search_for_dark_energy.html)

It is no surprise, then, that Sir Ken Robinson alerts me to the notion of a complex and unpredictable future, an holistic future, and that I am educating for a time and circumstances that I cannot envisage and predict, and will never know. I also learn from Robinson that frequently the processes of education, as we know them, kill creativity and that identifying each learner’s ‘element’ and developing this is key. [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html)

[http://blog.ted.com/2010/05/24/bring\\_on\\_the\\_re/](http://blog.ted.com/2010/05/24/bring_on_the_re/).

***How has / does my understanding of learning influenced my practice?***

I am continuously inclined to enquire closely into the nature of learning. What exactly is learning? To my mind, one of the most distinguishing features of learning is that it changes the learner. I am acutely conscious of the fact that I am not the same person I was before I embarked on my masters and doctoral studies. I have changed. The change came automatically with the learning. And I ask “How does this happen?”

My understanding of learning is informed by Marcel Jousse’s notion of ‘intussusception’ (Jousse, 2000: ???).

Jousse claimed visceral intussusception meaning the biological ingestion of thought and emotion long before this was suggested and demonstrated in scientific studies and laboratories. Evidence of the possible reliability of Jousse’s early insights comes from the laboratories of Jacques Benveniste and Candace Pert. Benveniste (Schiff 1995 and Benveniste et al 1988) demonstrates “the memory of water” (Davenas et al [http://www.lbn.org/cgi-bin/node.pl?lg=us&nd=n4\\_1](http://www.lbn.org/cgi-bin/node.pl?lg=us&nd=n4_1)) and the “Transatlantic transfer of digitized antigen signal by telephone link”. ([http://www.lbn.org/cgi-bin/node.pl?lg=us&nd=n4\\_3](http://www.lbn.org/cgi-bin/node.pl?lg=us&nd=n4_3)) which implies the possibility that molecular information is communicated by electromagnetic waves in water. Can we then assume that, as our bodies are on average 70% water, the water content of the body has something to do with memory? Benveniste’s investigations indicate this and Lyall Watson, investigator of the evolutionary perspective, certainly thinks so (Microphone-In, SAfm, 19 January, 2000: 21h30). What then of the brain? The brain is the wettest part of our beings at 90% water, so if water has to do with memory, naturally it has the edge. In *Wax Tablets of the Mind*, Small concludes that we are “hardwired and run software in our wet ware” (1997:244).

Pert provides even more compelling evidence of the visceral-psychological operation with the discovery of opiate receptors in 1972, and later neuropeptides which situate emotion - and therefore all other ‘psychological phenomena’ - in the viscera: our *Molecules of Emotion* (1997). We think with and feel with our whole indivisible psycho-physiological complexus of geste, and that indivisibly resonating to the rhythms of the universe - whether we like it or not. If we are to believe Jousse, we are inextricably connected to the universe in much the way that the ancients said we were: ‘we know in our waters’, ‘we feel it in our bones’, ‘it tears the guts out of us’, ‘it is heart-wrenching’, or ‘heart-rending’. (Conolly, 2000:???)

In 2000, Candace Pert declared “Your body IS your subconscious mind.”

So, Sugata Mitra’s hole in the wall experiments come as no surprise to me, and provide interesting insights into children learning in a foreign language without a teacher, demonstrating learning as a ‘self-organising system’. [http://www.ted.com/talks/sugata\\_mitra\\_shows\\_how\\_kids\\_teach\\_themselves.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_shows_how_kids_teach_themselves.html).

All in all I am increasingly convinced that if we are to understand learning, we have to understand ourselves individually. I take direction from Jousse ...

Man becomes aware of man: the experimenter is simultaneously the experimented. Man is no longer this unknown' : he becomes his own discoverer. The only person one can know well, is oneself. But to know oneself well, one must observe oneself thoroughly. The true Laboratory is therefore the Laboratory of the Self. (...) All science is awareness. All objectivity is subjectivity. (Jousse 2000:25-26)

My studies in the oral tradition have provided me with valuable wisdoms.

Much have I learned from my masters  
And from my fellow brothers more than from my masters  
And from my disciples more than from anyone.

bab. Taanit 7a  
Jousse , 2001a :32  
*The Parallel Rhythmic Recitatives of the Rabbis of Israel*

And I firmly believe that learning, memory and its expression define human capacities uniquely ... <sup>v</sup>

“Memory is the Whole of Man  
And the Whole of Man is Memory”  
Marcel Jousse, 2001b:16

### ***How has the DUT strategic plan influenced my practice?***

Although the SeStuTHESA practice predates the Durban University of Technology Strategic Direction, (2008-2012), I was pleased to discover that the activities of SeStuTHESA @DUT are aligned. Knowing that we are aligned with the strategic plan of our institution tells us that both the institutions and we are on the right track. The Durban University of Technology Strategic Direction, (2008-2012), includes ...

1. interweave the specific knowledge of their discipline or profession with the education and training required for the learning, teaching and assessment to prepare graduates to be critical and creative contributors in the workplace;
2. identify the relationship between technology, people, knowledge and society;
3. develop their capacity to deal with a variety of fields of study simultaneously;
4. critique the way that people ‘make things’ which serve society, and to manage their use and application;
5. “make knowledge useful” and “identify the needs and problems of society and find solutions to these”.
6. become “a new generation of knowledge workers” in terms of their “work ethic, ability to work in multi-cultural teams, students-for-life, etc”.
7. inform themselves how learners learn and how they should teach.



8. focus equally on how “resources” contribute to “results”; on how faculty productivity informs student productivity; on what both faculty and learners need to learn;
9. make productive seamless connections between ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘research and development’
10. promote innovation in curriculum and classroom practice, and develop partnerships with local, national and international universities.
11. respond directly to the needs of learners as a community critical to the success of the university, and strive to increase undergraduate throughput.
12. improve their qualifications so that they are inline with the requirements of a university.
13. provide quality transfer of knowledge in ways that are user friendly for the learners and yet effectively address the needs of the workplace and so underpin the national economy.”

***What is my leading assumptions about human epistemology, ontology and axiology?***

I observe that human epistemology, ontology and axiology are inextricably intertwined and mutually informing.

The following assumption about human epistemology, which I found myself writing down during a period of reflection after meditation one morning during 2009, appears on all the SeStuTHESA workshop programmes.

I work on the assumption that people already know much of what they need to know, but that they often are unaware that they know what they know, and that they become aware of what they know and how to use what they know by reflecting critically on their practice and from interacting with others.

Subsequently, I have realized that I have further intuitive assumptions. Leading from the assumption recorded above, I work on the assumption that, when people become aware that they know and what they know, viz. when they ‘learn’, they ‘change’, and if they are critically aware, they realize that they are changing, thus informing them ontologically.

I have become aware of yet another assumption. This has been largely as a result of working first with Brown’s second question – “Why did I do it?” (recorded later in this article) and later as my understanding of the living theory of Jack Whitehead developed. This assumption refers to belief and values driven practice, the axiology of the process of improvement of practice.

These three assumptions – the three legs of an African cooking pot - inform my approach to the leadership and facilitation of the SeStuTHESA project. In other words, I believe in the human capacity to learn and know as an anthropological drive. I value human knowledge and learning, and believe in the human capacity for change and improvement, also as an anthropological imperative. The more that I work with the SeStuTHESA group, the more convinced I am of the truth and reliability of these assumptions. The more convinced I am, the more I trust the process. The more I trust the process, the greater is the ‘space’ that emerges. The greater the space, the more creative, innovative and productive people become ...

### *How do my assumptions translate into my practice?*

My educational practice has a lot to do with ‘encouragement’, which I relate to Jack Whitehead’s “life affirming energy” (Whitehead, 2008:??). Given my understanding of ‘education’ as defined by Jousse above, and given all the factors I have identified thus far, I value ‘encouragement’ as an educational tool.

I understand ‘encouragement’ as ‘(En = In) + (courage = heart) + (ment = mind)’. What then puts ‘heart’ into my ‘mind’? I can identify three factors. First, I value scholarly support – the kind that respects all people and research and always assumes the best in others, until proved otherwise. Second, I value a rationale which is as unassailable as possible. This applies to all of the epistemology, the ontology and the axiology of the process. My position in this matter has been spurred by the unnecessary, incomprehensible and indefensible confinements, restrictions, obstructions, obfuscations, bigotries, inequalities, and injustices from both within and outside the Academy<sup>vi</sup>. Third, my lived experience of 42+ years in the profession has provided me with innumerable instances of inspiration.

How do I attempt to put ‘heart’ into the ‘minds’ of the SeStuTHESA group members?

I believe that everyone who comes to SeStuTHESA, and returns repeatedly, is sincerely wanting to grapple with the question :

“How can we simultaneously raise both the under-graduate and postgraduate throughputs  
in a newly merged university of technology  
where the teachers have heavy teaching loads,  
with high learner-teacher ratios,  
and where the learner profile is highly diverse in every way imaginable,  
in the context of an infant democracy,  
high rates of unemployment

rampant poverty  
and the HIV/Aids pandemic?"

In other words, I believe that the people who want to be active in the SeStuTHESA group are people like me, viz. that they already embody much of the knowledge they need, that they are innately driven to learn and change and improve what they do, and that they value and love their fellow human beings and all on the planet which we share. So I strive to provide a role model of these values and beliefs, in the hope that that role model will encourage them. (I reflect on this a little later.)

***How does critical reflective self study and action research influence our professional practice?***

I am indebted to Claudia Mitchell who, when opening a Self Study Seminar at Durban University of Technology, on 19 August, 2009, said, "Self study is a broad church". My understanding of that broad church is informed by the 'Laboratories of Awareness', of Marcel Jousse (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009), the 'Living Theory Methodology' of Jack Whitehead (2008), the critical reflective auto-ethnography' of Peter C Taylor (2007), and the visual and participatory methodologies of Pithouse, Mitchell, and Moletsane, inter alia :

What I do is also informed by the underpinning principle of critical reflective practice (Schon:????), action research (McNiff & Whitehead: ???) and the reconsideration of scholarship (Boyer???) ‘

***What has self study got to do with learning and with academic development?***

My short answer is :

“Everything ....

if one asks the question “How can I improves my practice as ....?”

(Jack Whitehead)

My longer answer includes my understanding that self-study for transformative personal and professional educational development and social action is intrinsically multidisciplinary and sometimes even holistic. I also understand that the use of self study can lead to a proper understanding and the application of learning- and learner-centred education through integration at many levels of educational practice. I believe that such an education prepares learners most effectively for life and the (working) world.

I identified that in order to attempt to answer the question ...

“How can we simultaneously raise both the under-graduate and postgraduate throughputs

in a newly merged university of technology  
where the teachers have heavy teaching loads,  
with high learner-teacher ratios,  
and where the learner profile is highly diverse in every way imaginable,  
in the context of an infant democracy,  
high rates of unemployment  
rampant poverty  
and the HIV/Aids pandemic?”

people needed to find a way to ...

1. transform the educational practices of learning, teaching and assessment so that the undergraduate throughput improves.
2. locate curricula culturally so that learners recognize knowledge so that they learn more easily and effectively, thus impacting positively on the undergraduate throughput.
3. and simultaneously increase the number of masters and doctoral qualifications among DUT educators (and others) to meet the minimum requirements for educator qualifications within higher education.

... to which we have recently added “connect the knowledge and capacity of the university with the knowledge and capacity in communities - equitably - for effective social impact”. And so the added ‘SA’ = ‘Social Action’, thus SeStuTHESA

### ***How do I influence those who are SeStuTHESA?***

In my leadership of SeStuTHESA@DUT, I endeavour to provide a supportive space for practicing educators to engage in a critical and reflective journey of (self)awareness so that they may (re)discover ...

- what they know and understand ...
- who they are ... and are becoming ...
- what they value and believe in ...
- and what their talents are, which they can use in the production of gifts for others, both as individuals and professional educators.

I constantly remind myself, and encourage the rest of the group, to remember the importance of “Know thyself, and then canst thou be false to no man.” (Aristotle, Socrates, Heraclitus, Shakespeare.)

When I reflected on my regular activities which inform the weekly and ongoing operations of SeStuTHESA, I was amazed at the number, variety, and range of tasks - some substantial, but mostly insignificant and mundane - that I perform routinely. (Writing things down brings a particular kind of awareness.)

I write proposals to generate funding for the project. I consult with and rely on the other SeStuTHESA team members, Delysia, Shubnam, Nalini, and Sibongile. I look for suitable partnerships. I post a message at the beginning of each week alerting everyone on the mailing list of the week's activities. I convene and ensure facilitation of a meeting each week for each group. I ensure that every meeting begins with food, small and simple but nutritious. I draw up a programme for each meeting, which always includes at least each of the following: Housekeeping, Thoughts for the Day, Activities, Brown's seven questions and my favourite Marcel Jousse quote: "Memory is the Whole of Man, and the Whole of Man is Memory". I take an attendance register, and collect evaluations of each meeting. I am available for 'one-on-ones' always within a week of the request, but preferably on the day of request. I respond to emails within 24 hours. I inform the group members of relevant events and visits. I 'make connections' in a variety of ways: people and people, people and ideas, ideas and ideas; people and events; people and books. I celebrate commonalities and difference : institutions, faculties, departments, disciplines, professions; faith systems, languages, nationalities, values and beliefs; I encourage the personal scholarly 'aut' – author – authenticity - authorship – authority. I make the most of every opportunity that presents itself. I encourage collaborations and partnerships across the institution, and between institutions; I explore the oral-literate interface – create and encourage the multi-medium mode of presentation. I explore and encourage 'whole being' and 'holistic' learning ...

### ***What have been/ are my significant challenges as leader of SeStuTHESA?***

There were two significantly challenging issues in the beginning of the establishment of the group. The first was to allay fears about doing research. I have come to realize that the people who come to SeStuTHESA meetings repeatedly are mostly 'novice' and 'nervous'. The 'novice' is self explanatory but the 'nervous', I have discovered from listening to stories of previous encounters with research, is the result of unreasonable demands, and harsh and belittling criticism, of supervisors being self-appointed or appointed by the institutions in the form of an HOD, a 'Research Professor' or 'Research Fellow', and the imposition of a topic and /or methodology for study by someone in authority. I make it very clear to everyone who attends SeStuTHESA that I am there in whatever capacity they choose. Some have asked me to supervise, or co-supervise. Others have asked me to mentor, and some attend and participate and move on. There is no compunction to adopt any particular role or relationship. The only criterion for attendance and participation is to be actively engaged in some or other transformatory practice.

The second was to developing the capacity of each person to speak about what they do using the personal pronouns "I", "me", "my", and "myself". I knew the power of this as I had already experienced it myself. In my doctorate, I reported on processes which I had originated. I chose to write this in the first person. When I found myself writing in the third person and the passive voice, I learned to stop myself and ask : "How confident am I that I am able to defend this point to a critical audience?" In every instance, I discovered that I was not sufficiently confident. In effect, writing in the first person has become my way

of ‘knowing that I know’. I found a most useful ally in Robert Brown, who records ... (The exclusions are mine in the interests of brevity.)

One of the most destructive myths in scholarly writing is that it is unacceptable to write in the first person. (...) Watson and Crick (1953:737) took a Nobel Prize with a paper that began ‘We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid ...’ and there are plenty of similar examples. (...) So why are so many scholars unwilling to use the first person? The answer is simple : fear! (...) It extends along the lines of thinking that if the words are written by a third party and there happens to be an error in them, the error must be the responsibility of the third person and not the author. This then allows the author to say dopey things but not have to take responsibility for them – I know that that does not make a sense, but it is often how people think. (...) So if you have a student who insists on preparing a thesis entirely in the third person even after you have explained that it is acceptable to use the first person occasionally, take that as a clear signal that you have a student who is scared to accept responsibility for his or her words. Treat this seriously because good scholarship cannot be divorced from personal responsibility and poor scholarship is a luxury that none of us can afford. (Brown, 1994: 105/6)

So, every time I find myself writing in the third person, I regard myself as ‘my student who cannot take responsibility for what I am writing’. So I stop and consider what is undermining my confidence, and find ways of addressing the lacuna.

So when members of the group tell me that they cannot express themselves in the first person, I take particular note, and attempt to discover the origin of their difficulty. The responses that I have heard fall mainly into the following four categories.

1. “Self Study is self indulgent narcissistic navel gazing. It is unacademic and unscholarly.” Such concerns are allayed by referring to the evidence in the public space in the form of websites and completed theses. I have also found that having self study scholars visit the group is also encouraging and emboldening. (See later in the article.)
2. “I cannot use “I” because it feels like showing off.” When I ask people who say this, to tell me about their learners, they very quickly and enthusiastically narrate their learners’ latest achievements or difficulties. I then ask them to tell me how they, themselves, respond to the achievements or difficulties of their learners, and the response is phrased in reference to “one” or “you”. I ask “Who is this ‘one’?” and “Who is this ‘you’? Why are you telling me that I did this in your classroom? I was not there.” And from there it is a simple matter to show that ‘telling in the first person for research purposes’ is a sophisticated ‘show-and-tell’, ‘accounting for’, and not ‘showing off’.
3. “I cannot do that because I do not know.” This is the response of those who do not believe that they have a right to their ‘own voice’, to their ‘own knowledge’. I find this so paradoxical, so contradictory, because in every instance the speaker is someone who has immediately prior to this statement, described clearly and with wise and intelligent educational insights, the behaviours of

his or her learners. When it is pointed out to them that they have already produced the evidence of their knowing, they are amazed.

4. “In my culture, we do not speak about ourselves.” I find this is a little more difficult to address, as I am aware of the sensitivities surrounding culture. This statement implies that an extended body of knowledge and the opinions of many others are supporting the speaker’s position. I have found that using appropriate cultural adages can be useful, such as “Know thyself, and then canst thou be false to no man.” and “Love thy neighbour as thyself.” Other responses which have allayed these discomforts have included the view that “Actually you are not talking about yourself, you are talking about your learners, and their behaviours and your relationships with them.”

Most important of all is the response and support of the group. As each individual has found his or her ‘voice’, he or she becomes supportive and encouraging of others. The most effective support and encouraging remarks focus on the work, not the person – “That is so beautiful! How did you achieve that effect?” and “And when you did that, what did the learners do?” and “That was such an exciting thing to do. What happened next?” This is where my behaviour as role model is important. Initially SeStuTHESA-ites model themselves on my behaviour informed by my values and beliefs. Ironically and significantly, as the project has evolved, I find the ‘boot often on the other foot’. I find increasingly that there are instances where I am following the role model of one of the group. I consider this a significant indicator of holistic development.

A challenge which we revisit often is understanding the origin, nature, and function of ‘theory’. A most useful ally has been Robert Brown again. Brown identifies seven questions which help to clarify research and keep it on track. The questions are ...

1. What did I do?
2. Why did I do it?
3. What happened?
4. What does this tell me about my theory?
5. What does this tell me about my practice?
6. What is the key benefit to the readers?
7. What remains unresolved?

( Brown :???)

These questions are useful in the first instance because they effect a research discipline through repeated use. Perhaps even more importantly, the sequence of the questions provides a useful framework to report

on the research activity. Last but by no means least, the second question “Why did I do it?” focuses on the beliefs and values of the practitioner-researcher, and the underpinning rationale for the action taken in “What did I do?” This helps the practitioner- researcher to identify his/her *raison d’etre*, his/her “I believe ...”, his/her ‘personal theory’. We have ongoing discussions about the relationship between ‘personal theory’ and what we have come to call ‘grand theory’ which is ‘published theory’. I am at pains to remind us all repeatedly that theory derives from practice, informed by critical reflection in and on action (Schon).

### ***What did SeStuTHESA@DUT do between January, 2009 and August, 2010?***

In 2009, we hosted 9 international scholars, and 6 national scholars engaged in similar academic endeavours, all of whom facilitated workshops. We hosted and facilitated 50+ weekly workshops of an operational and support nature: Wednesday, 12.00-14.00, (until July, 2009); Thursday, 13.00-15.00 (2010); Friday, 12.00-14.00-16.00. Members of the group have made eight presentations at national and international conferences. Three publications have already been accepted and published. There are three others being prepared for publication. The UoT slogan – “making knowledge useful” - is being enthusiastically embraced in a number of exciting initiatives across faculties. On 10 December, 2009, we hosted a regional meeting for ECP which was attended by ECP and Self Study researchers from MUT, UKZN, WSU, DUT and Universidade Pedagogica in Maputo. We prepared two MOU’s for partnerships with Curtin and Universidade Pedagogica, Maputo. These are now with the International Office at DUT. Conservatively, 10 members of DUT staff have undertaken post-graduate study in the self study mode. They are either preparing for pre-registration, are pre-registered, or have registered. Altogether there are 30+ members of DUT staff who have expressed interest in self study of one kind or another for their post-graduate qualifications.

### ***What is happening in the group?***

We frequently have ‘AHA!’ moments, ‘confessions’, and even a couple of amazed and amazing ‘epiphanies’! The workshop evaluations express appreciation for a safe and encouraging space to talk/write about their transformatory practice, and to make sense of this in a scholarly way. Confidence and innovation are growing. Role reversals are becoming more frequent and significant (as reported earlier). SeStuTHESA-ites are modeling their teaching on our SeStuTHESA type activities and interrogations.

The fifteen presentations at the action research seminar held at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University on 19 and 20 August, 2010, demonstrate what we, as a group of ‘nervous’ and ‘novice’ researchers, have achieved. SeStuTHESA writings in this conference proceedings bear further testimony.



### ***How is SeStuTHESA being supported at DUT?***

Any project of this kind can only operate successfully when its existence is supported with the energy – material, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual - of people. SeStuTHESA is being supported at DUT in a number of ways.

The two most important sources of support are the interest, enthusiasm and engagement of the SeStuTHESA team members – Delysia Timm, Shubnam Rambharos, Nalini Chitanand, and Sibongile Madi - and the SeStuTHESA-ites, who voluntarily attend weekly meetings every Friday afternoon! I often only say goodbye to the last SeStuTHESA-ite at 17.00 after a start at 12.00.

Money is always a critical issue in the effectiveness of any project. A great deal of what we have achieved, particularly in 2009, has been made possible because of the collaboration with Shubnam Rambharos who co-ordinates the Extended Curriculum Programme at DUT. We were able to host the July, 2010, seminar at DUT with the sponsorship provided by Professor Sibuy Moyo, who is currently DUT Research Director. We were able to present fifteen papers at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Action Research seminar in August, 2010, because of the sponsorship from the DUT Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Otieno.

### ***What has been the significant influence of SeStuTHESA?***

What has been the significant influence of SeStuTHESA, and its impact on its participants, the university and others? (For the sake of brevity I report here in point form)

1. Fifteen SeStuTHESA attended and/or presented papers or had papers presented on their behalf at the Action Research Seminar at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University on 19 and 20 August, 2010.
2. Fourteen DUT staff and students contributed three chapters to *Making Connections: Self Study and Social Action* edited by Kathleen Pithouse, Claudia Mitchell and Lebo Moletsane: Chapter five : Marlene De Beer : Chapter six : Conolly et al :Chapter 15 : Liz Harrison : *Making Connections* was presented to the DUT on 5 May, 2010 in the DUT Art Gallery
3. The first doctoral degree in self study at DUT – D Tech Education –was awarded to Dr Snoeks Desmond in April 2010. The title of her thesis is : A Journey in Family Literacy : Investigation into Influences on the Development of an Approach to Family Literacy.

Dr Desmond's examiners' reports included :

"In my experience of supervising and examining self-study theses, writers have some difficulty in retaining a clear connection between the writings grounded in practice and the writings grounded in the academic discourses of traditional theory and policy. This thesis overcomes this difficulty in showing how a narrative can be constructed that captivates the imagination of a reader through the focus on improving practice." Jack Whitehead

"I would strongly recommend that she consider publishing this work in a book format, as it would serve as an invaluable resource for researchers and practitioners in the fields of adult and early childhood literacy, as well as broader education and development arenas." Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan

### ***How am I continuing to improve my practice?***

The most valuable mode of improving my practice is to LISTEN! All the members of SeStuTHESA are typical of higher education educators everywhere in South Africa (and perhaps even the world). They teach unmanageable numbers of learners, for as many as 30 contact hours per week. In addition they have administrative tasks, and other university duties to perform. AND they are required to study for senior degrees. And all of that before they have families to take care of. They all need a listening ear. And until they have unburdened themselves of what is foremost in their consciousness, what is waiting BEHIND their burdens cannot find its way into their awareness. So I listen. From listening to the members of the group, I learn what it is that we must do next.

Every morning, I write reflectively about the events of the previous day.

I read the writing of the members of the group, sometimes as many as five contributions in one day.

I read the published work of other reflective self study practitioners.

I watch TEDTALKS! Because they fill me with wonder at the inventiveness and intelligence of my fellow humans.

I am learning to 'blog', and participate in list serves, and construct an online conversation space for SeStuTHESA-ites.

### **Conclusion**

To answer Jack's questions, I believe that the reason that SeStuTHESA-ites, myself included, are as inventive, committed and educationally influential as they are, is best explained by Patanjali ...

When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds; your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction, and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world. Dormant forces, faculties and talents become alive, and you

discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be. Patanjali (c. 1st to 3rd century BC) (7649 wds)

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<sup>i</sup> See Chapter nine of *Freedom Sown in Blood*, and (C)Omissions in *JNGS* for fuller explanation of these insights, and reasonings.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Mens sana in corpore sano* = a healthy mind in a healthy body, is a famous Latin quotation. It is derived from [Satire X](#) of the [Roman](#) poet [Juvenal](#) (10.356). In context, the phrase is part of the author's answer to the question of what people should desire in life.

<sup>iii</sup> *tradere* – to pass from hand to hand, hence 'tradition'.

<sup>iv</sup> Oliver Sacks provides evidence in *Hidden Histories of Science* edited by Rivers, as does Michael Schiff in the *memory of water*.