

Relational Reading~Writing~Thinking~Becoming in Higher Education: Possibilities for scholarly reading and writing in times of turbulence

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Abstract

The paper explores our scholarly practice of collaborative academic writing by engaging with a Relational Reading of Text approach and Slow scholarship. It grew out of our need to explore the tensions and inertia in our collaborative writing before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown, to find our way back to flourishing and thriving through each other. We draw on the relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming dimensions of 'sense of movement', 'shifts to the in-between spaces of meaning', 'the quality of kindred', and 'shared responsibility'. A collaborative autoethnographic approach was used in relation to the notion of diffraction. We conceptualise a 'pandemic-transformed' approach for us to not only survive the digital turn our co-writing practices have taken but to find our way back to an authentic, creative, and joyful engagement. Insights may be of value to other academics who seek to co-write in ways that support flourishing and Slow scholarship in higher education.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, collaborative reading and writing, relationality, slow academic scholarship

Introduction

The turbulence created by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing demands of the neoliberal university (Badat, 2020; Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022) have placed further constraints on the time and space academics have found to read, deeply think, converse in community, write, co-write and publish. Du Preez and Du Toit (2022) argue that within the constraints of the neoliberal university, academics do not have adequate time to properly engage in deep-level scholarly work.

Engaging in Slow scholarly practices such as Slow writing groups (Collett, et al., 2020) and the formation of collaborative reading groups (Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022) or the promotion of "quiet" writing retreats (Keane, 2017) have been some of the strategies engaged in by academics to deepen their scholarly work both before and during lockdown conditions. Bozalek (2017) and



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Keane (2017) argue for spaces within which to engage in writing pedagogies aimed at restoring a sense of well-being and mindfulness.

For the past five years, we have met weekly, in-person and online, to read, talk, co-write, and publish together. Our writing community is made up of three female academics (affectionately known as the CHECmates) from different disciplines and different higher education institutions (HEI). During the COVID-19 pandemic, we experienced ourselves moving away from Slow attentive and deep engagement with each other and our writing. Increasingly, our motivation and inspiration to co-write and think about our co-writing began to dwindle as other competing demands Zoomed in and out of our lives. Not being able to meet regularly in a physical space increased a growing sense of disconnection and the loss of an embodied relationship required for our collective meaning-making and writing. Although Bozalek, et al. (2021) argue that they were able to experience a level of being in-touch and being touched by others through their daily Zoom connection in a reading-writing group, we experienced a loss in the quality and depth of our engagement and what can be described as disconnected-connectedness. For all of us, working and teaching predominantly in the online space between 2020 and 2022 and part of 2023 increased our workload demands and the pace of busyness. These factors had a direct influence on our ability to connect regularly and in an attentive way.

This paper grew out of our attentive consideration and grappling through our practice of collaborative academic writing and the development of our scholarship of teaching and learning. A collaborative autoethnographic approach (Chang, et al., 2016) underpinned by a relational ontology (Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017a) was used to explore our experiences of collaborative reading~writing~thinking~becoming before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We use the intra and inter-related terms of co reading-writing-thinking-becoming to describe the multi-relational and generative quality of our experience of working together in generating ideas and text, as it more aptly names our processes of co-constituting our being, doings and meaning-making as scholars.

In our collective research endeavours over time, we applied a diffractive analysis to our recollections of thoughts, discussions, walks, drawings, and readings. This ongoing approach to co-constituting matter and meaning facilitated a more intricate exploration of the interplay among different perspectives and viewpoints, spanning various temporal contexts (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017a). These processes gave rise to novel and imaginative insights that we drew on to explore, reclaim, and recreate the time and contexts within which we could pay attention to deepening our relationality to ourselves, each other and our worlding. Here the work of Haraway (2016) provided us with key concepts and ideas to explore the disease and inertia we were experiencing. Haraway's work (2016: 1) raises the question, How do we 'rebuild quiet places' or 'a thick present? We questioned what a "thick presence", which was so generative for our writing, meant for us. A space where there were multiple unexpected intra-actions that were generative and creative. What we missed was this generative embodied space which had taken a lot of time, energy and commitment to create and which held us through difficult times and helped us withstand a lot of strains we were going through. We acknowledged that during lockdown we

did not have the time to reposition ourselves and to make time to re-calibrate. Although we attempted to continue online, we lost the motivation to co-write. We agreed that within the online environment, different from how other researchers have experienced this environment, the “thick presence” was no longer there, and this made it difficult to continue. For us, a “thick presence” describes the feeling we had of being deeply connected to each other’s ideas and lives at a personal and professional level, and the changes that were taking place in a range of aspects of our lives. A feeling of really being in-touch and able to physically and emotionally be attentively in tune with each other. This raised the question: What eroded that thick presence in our co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming during the lockdown and why? And what can we do to remake a new kind of thick presence to enliven our co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming within this hybrid-connected context?

We explore our practice of collaborative academic writing, focused on our own co-writing before, during, and after lockdown conditions using several lenses to weave in and out of time. For us this was not perceived linearly, the past and present were entangled in everything that happened to us and the material world. We engage with Verster’s (2020a) conceptualisation of Relational Reading of Text dimensions of ‘sense of movement’, ‘shifts to the in-between space of meaning’, ‘the quality of kindred’, and ‘shared responsibility’. We also draw on the attentive and relational qualities of a Slow scholarship (Mountz, et al., 2015; Ulmer, 2017) as well as Barad’s (2007) notion of space~time~matter and Haraway’s (2016) concept of Symptoiesis to explore our co-writing practices.

Our paper begins by highlighting some of the tensions in academic writing within the HEI neo-liberal context. We then explore our before-, during- and post-pandemic practices of collaborative writing. In the discussion, we reflect on the four dimensions of relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming to conceptualise a ‘pandemic-transformed’ relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming approach as a way for us to not only survive the digital turn our co-writing practices have taken but to find our way back to an authentic, creative and joyful engagement.

Tensions in academic writing in the Neoliberal Higher Education context

As academics, we interrogate the pressures within our environments, pulled between a yearning for deep thinking, reading and conversation in our scholarly practice, and the demands to meet performative targets within tightening bureaucratic boundaries. Bozalek (2017: 43) argues that the ‘corporatisation of the academy has meant that market principles such as competitiveness, efficiency, excellence, consumerism, individualism and productivity now dominate all aspects of the university, including scholarship’.

Before the pandemic, we experienced a prevalence of increased managerialism and over-surveillance. Newport (2016: 10) argues for time free from distraction and fragmentation to create a space to do deep scholarly work and explore complex issues. These efforts create ‘new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate’ (Newport, 2016: 10).

These work pressures were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and were exacerbated by the combination of online and in-person academic activities. Like so many of our colleagues, we experienced heightened anxiety caused by constant reporting, audits, and the meeting of performance targets based on generic formulas, which overshadowed the joy and time of engaging in deep scholarly practice (Badat, 2020; Collet ,et al., 2020; Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022). We are split between caring for our students, providing counselling and support, upholding the academic programme of “no student left behind” and the requirements of our individual disciplinary areas. In the section below we explore the nature of our academic co-writing within the current turbulence of the higher education landscape caused by both the lingering effects of the pandemic and the continuous pressures of corporatisation.

The nature of our academic co-writing

Reading and writing as an ability is for the most part an assumed activity in academia. Writing and publishing are privileged by academia and Jackson and Mazzei (2009) argue they shape ‘practices, conventions and career trajectories’ through ‘a sense of competition between fixed and distinctive “voices”’ (cited in Speedy, 2012: 352).

As a writing collective, we have explored our co-writing experiences (Collett, et al., 2018; Verster, et al., 2019; Collet, et al., 2020) drawing on the practice of Slow scholarship and Tronto’s (2013) Political Ethics of Care framework with its dimensions of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, trust and solidarity. Our collaborative engagements have encouraged us to heed the advice of Haraway (2016) to ‘[s]tay with the trouble’ and explore the possibilities and tensions of co-writing.

Our own experience of co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming acknowledges the multiple influences of each other and the complexity and interconnectivity of our contexts and lives on the development of the articles we write. Our own writing is based on deep introspection and consideration of our shared experiences and practices as academics. These experiences fit into what Speedy (2012: 353) defines as collectively inscribed writing, a form of writing that ‘emerges from the collating and interweaving of individually written texts in response to the same context, theme, or issue, rather than in response to each other’.

Being part of this writing community has been fundamental in developing our sense of what a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning means. These activities have encouraged us to explore our own teaching and learning and expose ourselves to what Zembylas (2017) calls a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’. These processes of collaborative insights required us to grapple with these uncomfortable tensions. Here, feedback from reviewers and peers highlighted blind spots in our own awareness, both as individuals and as a group. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) argue that these processes are needed by academics to support them in undergoing uncomfortable learning and unlearning processes in their professional development journey.

Our co-writing practices since mid-2016 took place through regular weekly in-person meetings enriched by our experience of collectively attending at least one professional development course per year. These co-shared activities and processes enabled us to work as a

group on joint publications. Such courses provided the stimulus needed to frame and guide our professional development outside of our respective disciplines. They also created a common understanding and shared practices related to our development of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. These collaborative and engaged spaces generated shared insights, discussion, reading, and writing around innovation in our teaching and learning. Having this continuity of engagement opened a space for deep scholarly work. Furthermore, we used conference presentations to develop our academic arguments and writing by seeking inputs and comments from conference attendees. This both enriched our writing and helped us to build a network of critical friends and connections to scholars in the field.

Speedy (2012) argues that the explicit and continued practice of co-writing in higher education can potentially alter the spaces and ethical know-how that academics inhabit. She argues that this practice can support the 'emergence of this different sense of scholarship and scholarly work and even, perhaps, of what it means to be a human being amidst human beings'. (Speedy, 2012: 349).

Du Preez and Du Toit (2022) and Liebowitz and Bozalek (2017) affirm the potential of reading-writing in pushing the boundaries of knowledge through engaging academics in creative and joyful activities. However, these authors also argue that the joy and creativity of academic writing can be damaged by the competitive nature of publication records and research impact factors that are used as measuring tools. We affirm the need for authentic and creative forms of co-writing to offer a more responsive approach to academic inquiry and the fostering of stronger and more supportive academic communities that promote greater resilience and adaptability.

Methodology

In generating the data to write this paper, we followed a Collaborative Autoethnographic (CAE) approach which is a method of 'researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their socio-cultural context' (Chang, et al., 2016: 17). In our collective research endeavours over time, we applied a diffractive analysis to our recollections to explore the intricate interplays among different perspectives and viewpoints across different times and spaces. This process gave rise to what Bozalek and Zembylas (2017a) refer to as novel and imaginative insights. It foregrounded the intra-action and connections between human and non-human phenomena, instead of contemplating the meanings of texts or events, diffraction emerged as an ethical and conscientious practice of engaging to acknowledge our past, present, and future contributions to knowledge, without neglecting or dismissing any of these valuable contributions. The collection and analysis of data in CAE are typically done by two or more participants. In our collaborative engagement, we attempted to generate fresh patterns of understanding in our weekly conversations. We recorded and transcribed online conversations and captured other shared insights and also applied the Collaboration as a Social Practice (CoSoP) board as another method to facilitate deeper insight into our collective experience. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection tool, the conversation board, that was used.



Figure 1: A populated conversation board, the CoSoP board, with conversation cards (Verster, 2020b)

The data was generated through a co-created method of conversational explorations. One of these methods was to engage collectively with the CoSoP board (Verster, 2020a) to guide the exploration of specific themes, in this case, the dimensions that make up collaboration. A single scribe is tasked with capturing the main comments of the conversation on the conversation cards. This method as illustrated in Figure 1 above, has the advantage of simultaneously creating data through conversation cards and coding by using different colours (Verster, 2020b). This method is highly interactive as an opportunity to ponder, discuss and think through the focus of each card before it is placed on the board. We utilised a thematic analysis approach, which was co-created, as emphasised by Hernandez, et al. (2017: 252):

When multiple autoethnography engage each other in CAE data collection and analysis, they complement, contradict, and probe each other as critical peers. As multiple perspectives and experiences are contested, the singularity of individual perspectives is tamed through intersubjectivity and multivocality.

Unlike other CAE studies (Arnold & Norton, 2021; Godber & Atkins, 2021), this study did not focus on individual narratives as the basis for reflection. Our insights were always in the form of a collaborative conversation which provided an opportunity for what Hernandez, et al. (2017, 253) refer to as 'relational authenticity' where power and responsibility are shared in equal measure.

Tracking our shifting relational writing practice

In this section, we explore our collaborative insights weaving across time to contemplate our pre-pandemic, during-pandemic and post-pandemic practices. The conversation is structured according to four focus areas, the context, the mode, the process, and the effects. The 'context' refers to those external factors that shaped the world/setting within which we worked at co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming. The 'mode' refers to the way in which we engage, whilst the 'process' relates to our experience of the processes, tools and frameworks that influence our reading~writing~thinking~becoming. The 'effects' are the results of how and in what ways we engaged thus the creative and explorative ripples created from the complex interrelationships between the context, mode and process.

Our pre-pandemic approaches to relational co-writing

Context

Pre-pandemic conditions in higher education reflected all the pressures academics faced in working within the constraints and pressures of the neo-liberal university. We all felt the pressure to publish or perish as we tried to negotiate the multiple demands of teaching, research and community engagement within the tightening grip of managerialism.

Mode

In the latter half of 2016, our collaborative writing endeavours were underpinned by the practice of meeting in person once a week for three to four hours. This routine served as a means of actively claiming time and space to engage in Slow Scholarship, a concept that emphasises thoughtful, deliberate and intentional engagement with academic work (Collett, et al., 2018). We were able to safeguard this dedicated time and communicate its significance to our respective departments. In addition to our weekly meetings, we were fortunate enough to attend a series of professional development courses as a team, which contributed to our scholarly co-development. This process allowed us to render each other capable (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017b), facilitating our ability to be 'attentive and responsive to each other's needs and how our writing might impact one another'. To foster an environment conducive to deep scholarly work, we scheduled dedicated time for what Du Preez and Du Toit (2022: 116) refer to as 'timeless time' to create a sacred space for undisturbed imagination as noted in one of our collaborative insights: 'it's a safe space, sharedness, no judgment, not responding to external pressures'.

Process

In addition to Slow scholarship, we explored Barad's (2007) relational ontology of space~time~matter which is explained as the material entanglements of both the social (human actions, practices and interactions) and natural agencies (non-human entities and settings) that emerge through relationships between space, time, and matter. We also drew inspiration from Haraway's (2016) concept of Symptoiesis as it refers to the process of becoming with and through each other in a collaborative relationship. A further inspiration that informed

our approach to reimagining academic writing in higher education (Collett, et al., 2020) was Tronto's (2013) Political Ethic of Care. Multimodality allowed us to engage authentically and creatively with the complexity of space~time~matter.

This allowed us to become a professional, caring community with a shared interest in claiming the time and space for engagement, which generated energy and inspiration for our writing and understanding of academic challenges.

Effects

In our response to the neoliberal demands of higher education, we were informed by our shared interest in intentional collaboration and co-production. To generate new energy and possibilities, we practised different modes of thinking, reading, writing, and rewriting. This was a time of awakening and exploration, and we looked forward to our weekly meetings of engaging at a personal and collective level, which became a platform for our ideas and emotions to take flight. These processes helped to build our caring and trust in each other, giving us space and permission to be both bold and vulnerable in the co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming process.

According to Barad (2007), diffractive reading involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge and highlight how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter. This way of intra-acting with text, context, and each other in an embodied and entangled way was a valuable tool for our co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming process.

While we tried to bring the benefits of reading in the social context, such as joy, relaxation, and immersion, into the academic space, we encountered several barriers such as time, noise, and the bombardment of demands, which made it difficult to prioritise academic reading (De Piero, 2019). Additionally, academic reading is often viewed as a disembodied activity, and it is not valued as highly as writing, which can be measured (Najman, 2017). Despite the barriers we faced, we recognised the value of academic reading and sought to bring the benefits of social reading into the academic space.

Our during-pandemic practices of collaborative writing

Context

The pandemic accelerated the pace of change and rapid adaptation in every aspect of our lives. We were increasingly stretched by the rapidly paced Zoomed environment engaging with colleagues and students and the competing demands of home-life-while-at-work demands in the same physical space. Trying to find a balance between these competing demands at an accelerated pace left us spinning and disconnected with our energies sapped. While all three of us were familiar with using technology to enhance our pedagogy and working in hybrid learning environments before the lockdown, these turbulent forces increased workplace demands on our time.

Our domestic responsibilities increased with the responsibility of supervising the education of our children and the scrambling for “home-office-space” was a challenge as our households were not set up for this. Finding relatively quiet and ‘alone’ spaces, to be able to focus and pay attention to our own thinking and writing or even making our co-writing online meeting spaces a priority became a challenge. Additionally, we did not have the depth of sharing, reflection and engagement in our practices of collaboration. This had an impact on our ability to sustain the momentum and motivation for co-writing as we were no longer coming from a shared practice and area of interest.

Mode

The dramatic and unanticipated shift to hard lockdown and online engagement and then a slow opening up to hybrid engagement characterised the mode of our co-writing during the pandemic. Meeting online was not the same as our in-person engagements as remarked by one of us: it is “difficult to read and get a sense of a living being in an electronic space”. Doing the type of writing that grew from deep levels of collaborative engagement was challenged in the online mode. Thus holding the online space attentively inhibited our focus and commitment to writing. As mentioned in one of our collaborative insights: “people feel they can invade your space because your digital diary is controlled and visible thus surrendering your autonomy to make your own decisions”.

We all felt this online mode and the frenetic pace of engagement left us little time for a depth of relationality (Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022). Even during our online meetings constant distractions (such as replying to urgent emails or completing other tasks online) took us away from being fully present and attentive to each other. We experienced what Grove, et al. (2022: 1) describe as a ‘connected disconnection ... fractured lines of togetherness’; we experienced it as ‘difficulty in drawing energy in online engagement’.

Although we had access to each other, we found that we had little time to focus, pay attention and process our thinking and engagement. One of us expressed this mode of engagement as a ‘lack of investing, with a veneer of relationality, a thin layer of business, you can show that you are busy because you have the electronic evidence, time logged, recordings, etc’. Another mentioned that in this online mode, ‘we lost the stride as we did not have the embodied experience’. We experienced the loss and the sharing of ideas more spontaneously and creatively where we could energise one another as expressed in one of our collaborative insights ‘the online space does not translate the energy, no creativity, the full human experience and all the different senses, you feel you are an avatar in a game’.

Process

Although our weekly writing time was booked on our Google calendars and we tried to log in together and rekindle our time to read-write-reflect and engage, we could often not attend. We all noted that our workload and pace of engagement had increased dramatically during this time.

We also started developing research interests outside of our group which put a strain on our levels of commitment to collaborative reading and writing.

The face-to-face professional development courses, which provided stimulating learning spaces for us, disappeared. In its place, a multitude of webinars and online courses from all over the world flooded the space and left some of us attending as many as possible, in a pursuit to find a foothold. During this period everybody had to upskill and upscale, and we all experienced the increased pace of engaging in the online environment which eroded space for downtime and quiet me-time or family time.

While a number of our colleagues did co-write and publish during this time, we found that although writing together made our work easier, as Gunder (2021) reminds us 'while we can move quickly alone, we can go further together', co-writing about our own shared practice was more difficult for us within the disembodied online context.

All of us experienced the process of working from home and in the online environment as very distracting. This took our attention away from focusing on each other, as captured in a collaborative insight: 'you tend to go where the noise is and not where the joy is, this is the online space - it demands your continuous attention via high levels of connectivity and having a whole ribbon of quick access buttons open in the computer toolbar'.

Finding time to "pause" and attentively deepen our reading~writing~thinking~becoming was an ongoing challenge. As the pace of our lives increased through online meetings planned back to back we experienced this environment as alienating, 'in the online space it is so easy to access a person, but no time to process anything'.

Effects

Our relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming practice was replaced by what we described as a 'fragmented Zoomed in and often zoned out connectivity'. Increasingly our engagement with each other and our sense of presence became diluted and diffused. A strong focus was placed on student support without strengthened systems for staff support. The support we had drawn from each other through our co-writing spaces was not able to be sustained in the online space. Our own circle of staff support became fractured and we all experienced the effects of depletion as we struggled to cope. We missed the embodied engagement and the authentic and spontaneous interactions of our face-to-face meetings that had been so generative to our writing and growth. We acknowledge that our in-person meeting experiences, could not be replicated in the online space. We realised that we could not create those 'moments that put one in a frame of mind that one can think deeply and creatively'. Although some academics such as Bozalek, et al., (2021) have experienced online spaces as generative in their co-reading and writing, we had a different experience within the Zoomed environment. The added workload and family commitments under the hard lockdown conditions severely disrupted our ability to engage attentively.

Not being able to meet face-to-face and having unsustained online contact reduced those moments of connection to form unexpected collaborative insights and learning. Part of our

stuckness and inertia in the online space was linked to feelings of depletion and the difficulty of trying to keep ourselves, our families and the academic programme on track. We did not have time to pay attention to ourselves and our own needs in the one space that nourished us in the past. We no longer felt that we were growing and feeding off each other's energy and this had an effect on limiting our motivation to write and prioritise time for meeting. Our feelings of responsibility towards ourselves and each other in our writing broke down to be replaced by a sense of depletion and guilt as mentioned in one of our collaborative insights: "no time to create the space to be part of each other's lives, no deepening of human relationships...We have pulled away in different directions".

Finding the time to read individually and collectively was a challenge as we started to lose the attentive and nourishing qualities of Slow writing. As mentioned by one of us we are 'not focusing on one thing at a time, artificial, skimming the surface'. Without deeper reading into our areas of interest and research our wellspring of creative ideas was drying up. We all felt guilty when we 'took time' for ourselves. This feeling was captured by the comment 'I don't deserve the me-time, cannot afford it, it's frowned upon because reading as an activity has nothing to show for itself, writing is measurable, but not academic reading'.

The during-pandemic approaches to relational co-writing were characterised by an increased sense of disconnection and fragmentation in our personal and professional lives that manifested in our co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming. Although we had committed slots to work online our ability to focus attentively and deeply on our work was limited. As our relationality became increasingly superficial, the threads of our writing and relationships became tattered.

A post-pandemic relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming practice

Context

Working in a hybrid or online way accelerated the pace of our work lives. In the "new normal" we were challenged to find a fit between both online engagements and managing face-to-face meetings or lectures. The expectations of academics at HEIs about supervision, publication, teaching and community engagement did not Slow. The constant change in our context due to AI, student protests and the shift back to online teaching, as well as the abundance of webinars, online workshops, and online training videos provided a further distraction from deep Slow scholarly work.

Mode

We had to find new ways of engaging and co-writing as both face-to-face and online options were available to us. Trying to find a balance between these competing demands at an accelerated pace still left us feeling overwhelmed and disconnected. In our Google diaries, we still had a space allocated for us to meet weekly; however, we tended to meet online more than face-to-face as other commitments tended to cut into this time or in many cases it felt like a more efficient use of time to avoid time wasted on travelling to campus and back.

Process

Engaging in hybrid spaces influenced our reading~writing~thinking~becoming processes of co-writing. When we met face-to-face we spent time reflecting on our co-writing experiences as well as planning and writing. Face-to-face meetings created more space for engaging with each other in a more authentic and embodied way, while the online spaces tended to focus more narrowly on synchronistically working on our writing online, or using the time to write on our own and then linking in online to share what we had written. The development of an authentic and embodied reading-writing space remained a challenge for all of us.

Effects

Our collaborative insights across time revealed that the challenges we experienced in the turbulent pandemic times were mirrored in the post-pandemic context. None of the pressures we faced as academics were alleviated in our current context, it has become even more of an indulgence to take time in a busy week to Slow read and write together. We grappled with the question: Is this the death of scholarship and deep scholarly engagement?

In our writing group at times we felt stuck, overwhelmed, unfocused and demotivated within a context of other more 'urgent' and 'important' matters that needed our attention. One of us commented, 'It's like we are trying to perform CPR on a person who is already dead'. We felt that time for Slow scholarship and authentic engagement within our higher education context was rapidly evaporating.

Discussion: Pandemic-Transformed relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming practice

In our discussion, we review the different aspects of our experiences pre, during and post-pandemic through the four dimensions of relational reading~writing~thinking~becoming as a 'sense of movement', 'shifts to the in-between spaces', 'the quality of kindred'. and 'shared responsibility'. The four dimensions of our conceptual lens are described below:

- A 'sense of movement' refers to the flowing movement between ideas, mediums, bodies, and concepts as we work collaboratively. How we move forward through positions, and our similarities and differences, to find the emergence of meaning. Through this sense of movement, we try to open spaces for new meaning and understanding within our relational practice.
- 'Shifts to the in-between spaces' is to move away from the obvious by focusing our thinking on what lies between thoughts and arguments to hear the hidden voices. The spaces where we look for unique conceptualisations and applications and ways of reading~writing~thinking~becoming.
- The 'quality of kindred' resembles the concept of relationality through its focus on 'being in relation to', a togetherness and a sense of belonging. This requires time to Slow down and deeply understand the collective voice or narrative.

- 'Shared responsibility' allows us to take a conscious stance and become allies in the meaning-making process.

'Sense of movement'

Our pre-pandemic 'sense of movement' was informed by embodied experiences such as using multimodality and concept mapping in our collaborative space to find new meaning. Often walking-talking-reading together, and working seamlessly over each other's writing. We were able to see ideas differently and experience ourselves and each other in new ways. As a result of our collaborative efforts, we formed a deep connection and established a V-formation approach that shared leadership and responsibility in our co-writing (Collett. et al., 2020). This approach built our confidence and strengthened our cohesion as a group.

During the pandemic 'a sense of movement' lacked depth and richness in our engagement as it was influenced by us meeting only in the online mode. While this did enable us to connect, much was lost in the creativity and fluidity of our interaction. We all found that we could be present on screen but absent in our attention to each other and our writing. The online engagement took away our ability to fly in a V-formation ... we lost our flight path and energy! Our collective processes of meaning-making dwindled as we had less and less time to pay attention to our personal relationships with each other, and our reading~writing~thinking~becoming. The turbulent nature of our working lives and the online space created a literal relation-slip, as well as slippages in our collective experience and understanding. Not tapping into each other's thinking and lives in an attentive way, affected our confidence in our ability to weave our thinking and writing together.

Post-pandemic we were working primarily in the online space which limited the extent to which we were able to engage in more spontaneous and creative ways through a range of multimodal experiences. We recognised the need for continuity of contact through weekly reading~writing~thinking~becoming sessions to build momentum and to hold our group together.

Moving Forward: We have to redefine our shared research and pedagogical practices and develop a process where creativity, Slow and attentive engagement are fostered. We further recognise our 'sense of movement' is directly linked to creative and multimodal methods of engaging ideas, text, theories and concepts.

'Shifts to the in-between spaces'

Before lockdown we intentionally allowed ourselves to Slow down and embrace the importance of taking time to collaboratively explore our experiences which provided the fertile ground for alternative meaning-making. This resulted in a deep level of engagement as summarised by one of our collaborative insights: 'The thick presence of collective memories where you don't think linearly, to create a space that allows for creativity and freedom'.

During the pandemic, the 'in-between spaces' for creative engagement were lost as on-screen engagement narrowed our focus and interaction. We were aware that the online meetings lacked a space to explore spontaneity and divergent thinking and attentive listening.

In our post-pandemic engagement the concept of 'relation-slip' emerged. We experienced relation-slip to be a space drained of creativity, trust, shared understanding, responsibility and embodied presence.

Moving Forward: For us to be in tune with each other, we need to create experiences together that are rooted in what brings us joy. These experiences should not be occasional events such as writing retreats, but preferably frequent and continuous mini-experiences. To consider the times when we felt most attuned, creative and inspired as academic readers-writers, a space away from the mundane, as captured by the collaborative insight 'not just embodied through bodies, but the context - the sunshine through the window, the cup of tea, the view'. Making time for shared practices of Slow reading~writing~thinking~becoming in aspects of our teaching and learning and scholarship was identified as essential in building spaces for innovative and creative thinking.

'The quality of kindred'

Before the pandemic, we looked forward to seeing each other and sharing aspects of our personal and professional lives. Our collective success was due to our attentiveness to each other's unique contributions, as captured in a collaborative insight: 'we found a kinship, a home'. Co-writing and thinking about our practices required an intense and embodied relationality that enabled us to seamlessly step into and out of each other's minds and hearts. However, our experiences showed us how easily our relationships can become fragmented and unproductive if we fail to pay careful attention to our needs.

During the pandemic, our 'quality of kindred' was reduced to sporadic online connections, with very limited in-person engagement and attention to each other, or our writing. This deeply affected the authentic quality of our sense of belonging and connection to each other. Our ability to reflect deeply on our co-writing dried up and our mode of relating and tapping into each other's lives became increasingly superficial and erratic. Within the turbulence of our context, we lost a sense of commitment and motivation to ourselves and the group.

Postpandemic we realised that meeting each other in-person was important in building our reading~writing~thinking~becoming relationship. As captured in a collaborative insight: "it does more than result in words on a page, it provides a comradeship and togetherness that can sustain our collaborative endeavours once back in the mundane".

Attentiveness, as captured in the notion of care, we realised, is key to nurturing a deep, embodied reading~writing~thinking~becoming experience. As one of us remarked, 'kin feed off each other's positive energy but also kin can "feed/eat" each other'. We acknowledged some of the negative manifestations of group dynamics in the many shades of guilt many working mothers experience.

Moving Forward: We recognise the need to hold a caring space in our week to nurture our relationships with ourselves and each other and be mindful of the causes of relation-slip. Identifying and sharing areas of common interest in our academic practice was identified as strengthening our motivation to come together as kin. These insights have affirmed for us a commitment to the principles and practices of Slow scholarship and an Ethic of Care.

'Shared responsibility'

When we started working as a writing collective, we developed a shared understanding of what it meant to engage in deep scholarly work. Through our collective experiences, we developed a mutual commitment to creating a safe space where we could share our practice and explore deeper possibilities.

During the pandemic, although we knew we needed to spend time reading, writing and thinking together, we found it increasingly difficult to prioritise time to commit to this 'shared responsibility'. Our motivation and sense of responsibility to make the weekly online session decreased as sustained time towards relating and writing decreased. Not completing articles collectively also influenced our motivation to work on a common task.

Post-pandemic we recognised the importance of holding a loose-tightness to 'shared responsibility' as our research focus has shifted to include projects outside our group. The glue that used to hold us together has lost its ability to do so which means we have to create new bonds and shared experiences to build a common understanding and motivation to write into our own thinking.

Moving Forward: We need to recapture the joy in our 'shared responsibility' to re-create the playfulness in us coming in to write and think at different times, going with the flow in both time and space. We need to build on our kinship of allies that embrace the freedom to choose what to read 'spending time on the text that resonates with us, reading our favourite author' and not be guided by a specific journal or academic conference theme or position. The epitome of Slow is where we take responsibility to attentively engage in our practice and what we want our practice to become.

Conclusion

In this paper, our collaborative insights provided an impetus for us to reimagine a collective future to rekindle joy in a challenging higher education context. Through a collaborative autoethnographic process, we have troubled our meaning-making as a writing collective and worked towards finding our way forward (Haraway, 2016) and cutting our experiences together-apart (Murris & Bozalek, 2019). We troubled the questions: What eroded that thick-presence in our reading~writing~thinking~becoming during the lockdown and why? And what can we do to remake a new kind of thick presence to enliven our co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming within this hybrid-connected context? We drew on different lenses to explore the tensions and inertia in our collaborative writing by juxtaposing different space~time~mattering in our co-writing practices before, during, and after the pandemic. Through our collective engagement, a

clearer understanding has emerged for us about what is needed to sustain our meaningful engagement as scholars.

We propose several orientations toward a more hopeful future in co-reading~writing~thinking~becoming. These include the fostering of a deeper relationality to ourselves and our environments by drawing on the wisdom of the Slow movements and embracing the dimensions of an Ethic of Care. It is important to re-kindle regular engagement to attentively consider our shared contexts and practices. Within turbulent times, there is the need to plan engagements that re-create playful, creative spaces to explore multimodal and sensory inputs to deepen our collective reading and thinking. Planning spaces for nurturing and reconnecting ourselves with nature is a vital part of the playful sensory input required to ground and connect us within the spinning virtual world. We propose the need for a tight-loose space, a structured-free-flowing space, an online-offline-in-person space, a continuous-disruptive space, and a safe-creative space to honour both our academic responsibilities and our personal flourishing.

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