CREATIVE TRIOETHNOGRAPHY AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE AND GROWTH: EXPLORING THE POWER OF RHIZOMATIC ANALYSIS AND BLACKOUT POETRY IN COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

In this reflective exploration, we navigate trioethnographic methodology employed to investigate our evolving professional identities and the concept of social justice in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Our journey, sparked by collaborative writing of a book chapter, emphasized creativity, dialogue, and an ethic of care, resonating deeply with our roles within the EAP for Social Justice Special Interest Group (SIG).

We explore the intersections of reflection, trioethnography, and rhizomatic analysis, revealing how these approaches facilitated a profound understanding of our experiences and identities. Blackout poetry emerged as a transformative tool, allowing for alternative interpretations and deeper engagement with our data. Our methodology challenged conventional academic norms, embracing non-linear, interdisciplinary approaches that celebrate multiplicity and inclusivity.

Through our research, we address the tensions between traditional academic writing and innovative, transformative narrative styles. The reflective process underscored the significance of trust, vulnerability, and ethical care in collaborative research. Ultimately, our work culminates in a manifesto advocating for creative knowledge-making and collaboration in EAP, urging EAP practitioners and other educators to embrace unconventional narratives and foster inclusive, empathetic learning environments.

Keywords: Trioethnography, Resistance, Growth, Creativity, Dialogue, Ethic of Care, Academic Writing, Research Paradigms, Blackout Poetry, Research Tool, Collaboration, Inclusivity

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INTRODUCTION

After our BALEAP conference workshop on 'Becoming socially just educators: A trioethnographic study of exploring professional identity through dialogue, ethics of care, and creativity', the feedback and reactions we received were deeply enlightening. A participant encapsulated the experience beautifully:

"The session was a powerful and thought-provoking talk that made a lasting impression on me and others... It addressed the urgent need for social justice in education, emphasising the role of educators in promoting equity and inclusivity... The trioethnographic approach offered a rich and multi-dimensional view... The 'Blackout Poetry' element invited the audience into a deeper engagement, allowing them to immerse in and contribute to the research findings. This talk had a profound impact on me, illuminating the power of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing educational challenges and emphasising the value of sharing knowledge across institutions."

Echoing these sentiments, Stephen Brookfield in his book "Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher" (2017) sheds light on the significance of reflection in teaching. He emphasises that truly critical reflection scrutinises the underlying power dynamics in educational settings, questioning and challenging established norms that might inadvertently work against both teachers and learners. Brookfield (2017) suggests that our assumptions as educators, formed from various sources like personal experiences, colleagues' views, student feedback, and theoretical readings, need regular introspection through multiple lenses to ensure our teaching actions align with intended outcomes. He also suggests that it is through these four lenses that we ought to interrogate our assumptions.

The catalyst for researching our 'becoming' was challenges and discussions encountered in our roles within the BALEAP English for Academic Purposes Social Justice Special Interest Group (EAP4SJ SIG). We faced inquiries into the definition and relevance of 'social justice' in the English for Academic Purposes realm and grappled with criticisms that our efforts sometimes prioritised certain marginalised groups over others. These challenges cultivated reflection within our SIG committee and led to additional initiatives. Rooted in the philosophy of scholarly activism - and a push for EAP Practitioners to influence higher education - our work, and the subsequent research, explored public pedagogy, eschewing traditional learning structures in favour of fostering open spaces for dialogue and genuine human connection.

The journey of writing our book chapter for Paul Breen and Michelle A. Le-Roux's 'Social Justice in EAP and ELT contexts – Global Higher Education Perspectives' (2024, Bloomsbury UK) and then transforming its content into a workshop at the BALEAP conference at Warwick, grounded in the innovative methodology of trioethnography, was a blend of creativity, resistance, and transformative growth. This reflective piece aims to unpack the tensions, challenges, and ultimately, the profound learning that emerged from our collective endeavour. The reflective piece will explore the following sections:

- Experimentation with Reflection: Delving into the myriad ways we incorporated reflective practices throughout our research process, and how these moments of introspection guided and shaped our understanding of professional identity and 'becoming'.
- Commentary on Blackout Poetry: A closer look at the transformative power of 'Blackout Poetry' in the presentation, discussing its ability to engage, evoke, and allow for alternative interpretations of our findings.
- Duoethnography & Rhizomatic Analysis: Examining the interdisciplinary and collaborative methodologies that we adopted, and how they added multiple dimensions and depths to our study.
- Pressure to Conform: A Dance Between Tradition and Transformation in Academic Writing: Addressing the tensions between adhering to conventional academic writing norms and embracing innovative, transformative narrative styles.
- Conclusion: Synthesising our insights, challenges, and takeaways from the entire research journey, highlighting the value of trioethnography in exploring complex, multifaceted issues in education.

Lastly, we will present a Manifesto—a powerful statement reflecting our aspirations, commitments, and the transformative vision we foresee for the future of academic research and pedagogy. This manifesto will serve as a call to action for educators, researchers, and practitioners alike to question, reimagine, and revolutionise traditional paradigms in favour of more inclusive, dynamic, and socially just education landscapes.

EXPERIMENTATION WITH REFLECTION

We would argue that throughout most EAP practitioners' careers, there is a strong focus on interrogating our assumptions using theoretical knowledge via the initial and further professional qualifications we

undertake and pursuit of fellowships from professional organisations such as BALEAP and the Higher Education Academy. In our practice, some of the most regular feedback we receive is via student evaluations of the modules and programmes we teach on. We may also receive feedback from colleagues in either peer and/or management teaching observation contexts. Whilst student feedback and peer/management observations can be enriching processes, they can also be anxiety inducing due to the power dynamics of the situation.

Given that our research focus was the phenomenon of emerging socially just educator identities, we knew we needed to take a wide view of our practice across our English Language Teaching careers (and perhaps our personal experience prior to that). We also recognised that more familiar pedagogy-based reflection frameworks from our EAP practice wouldn't serve the aims of our research project effectively.

We refer to our collective inquiry as trio-ethnography to acknowledge our individual contributions and highlight that three practitioners engaged in this qualitative research process. However, in terms of the methodology chosen for the inquiry, we followed the core principles of a specific type of autoethnography called 'duoethnography'. 'Duo' in duoethnography does not refer to the number of researchers undertaking it, although it is true that it has been founded and first undertaken by two authors: Sawyer and Norris in 2013. Instead, the 'duo' in duoethnography refers to the dual foci of this methodology: to explore a phenomenon and reconceptualise authors' narratives of their experience (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). In other words, the authors themselves are not the object of the inquiry. Instead, the stories they share 'offer a context for the analysis of socio-cultural factors affecting one's experience' (2013, p.23). It is this analysis and the impact it has on how the authors see their experience that are the main foci of a duoethnographic inquiry, which suited our needs for this research.

Embracing the tenets of duoethnography, our project centred our dialogue with each other as researchers as key to the research process. As such we prioritised critical reflection through the lenses of personal experience and conversations with colleagues over those of student feedback, colleague observations and theoretical sources. Within our book chapter we are transparent about this and openly share that this endeavour was not

"…a quest for 'book knowledge'. To start from that point would have felt dehumanising on a project that is centred in the human togetherness of being, knowing and becoming"

(Mighty, John & Winiarska-Pringle, 2024, p.101).

Next, we needed to decide how to be in dialogue with each other using methods that respected another tenet of duoethnography – polyvocality. In reflecting on how we might do this, it was useful to draw on the work of Hannah Arendt and Mikhail Bakhtin who highlight the importance of learning with and through each other. Both theorists acknowledge the uniqueness and equitable value of everyone's voice (Arendt, 1998; Bakhtin, 1981). Arendt's work foregrounds the importance of education as a dedicated space for thoughtfulness and suggests that through dialogical thoughtfulness we shape, re-shape and reconsider truth from untruth (Nixon, 2020).

In a further application of Arendt's thinking in educational research practice, Dillabough (2020) problematises reductive concepts of identity which are often used within educational research and policy making to box people in or rescue people from. She advocates for an alternative approach to understanding identity which recognises its imaginative and narrative aspects; the story-telling aspect; the historical aspect; the fluid nature of identity; of becoming self in relation to and through an understanding of others. She suggests that if it does not foster the imaginative story-telling aspect of identity, education and educational research is at risk of, "…standing as divided sites of proliferating advantage and disadvantage achieved in the name of identity but at the expense of a plural polis in search of meaning and action" (Dillabough 2020, p.78).

With this novel concept in mind of understanding identity, and a commitment to polyvocality, we sought out research methods that would allow us to tell our own stories and engage with each other's stories. Grounded in social justice and dialogue, duoethnography fitted our needs perfectly as this methodology requires the researchers to 'examine the temporal, social, cultural, and geographical cartography of their lives' in order to gain deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.16).

Duoethnography's generative meaning-making power lies in the exploration of difference in describing and interpreting life stories through the iterative process of dialogue. Indeed, our written and spoken conversations brought forth our multiple converging and diverging experiences and identities, helping us to interrogate our stories, to deconstruct and then reconstruct our respective interpretations of critical incidents in our professional careers. The stories we shared focused on moments of pain, joy and transitions/catalysts. We applied Langer's (2011) 'Five Stances' framework to read and respond to each other's narratives iteratively, applying different lenses to each engagement. The iterations included us each providing immediate and

more thoughtful individual responses to each other's contributions followed by group discussions to explore ideas in more detail. We then each created further individual responses to our discussions. (Mighty et al, 2024).

Our dialogues created space for transformation and growth on personal and professional levels alike, though this change is not guaranteed unless researchers are open to alternative interpretations of their stories. This openness to new perspectives on the lived experience is built upon centring trust and ethics of care at the heart of dialogues. This is another key tenet of duoethnography we were mindful of when exploring our emerging identities as socially just educators. It is important to note here, that despite the agreement to anchor our conversations in trust from the outset, we initially approached our critical conversations with a degree of understandable caution, gradually opening up to more intimate and, at times, painful experiences. It would be disingenuous of us to suggest that the end results of deeper understanding of our experiences and stronger bonds between us as researchers, colleagues and people have been achieved effortlessly in the course of this dialogic process. Duoethnography 'is about experience and is itself experience' (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.73) which can be emotional and disturbing as much as it can be affirmative and transformational. Such a space requires caring for the well-being of the others involved in the process as well as exercising self-care as transformational experiences can bring great discomfort to those entering it.

Despite these challenges, duoethnographic research offers a highly stimulating place to explore multiplicity of experiences and perspectives while allowing individual researchers' voices to remain separate and visible to the reader through reconstructed dialogues or as our case, through the poems we created from our respective reflections followed by the individual commentaries. The intention behind this polyvocal approach is that duoethnographers wish to engage the reader as a co-participant 'with the belief that readers or audience members will create their own syntheses or temporal insights that are contextual to their own times and places' (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p.107). Findings in duoethnography are not intended to be objective truths, but rather stepping stones of the researchers' growing understanding of the phenomenon nuanced and enriched by the critical conversations, and offering possible directions for the researchers' future actions. Our commitment to duoethnography, therefore, was not just a methodological choice, but a philosophical one. It encapsulated our aspiration to push the boundaries of traditional research paradigms, gain deeper understanding of our evolving identities as educators and Social

Justice SIG committee members by embracing dialogue as both a means and an end.

RHIZOMATIC ANALYSIS AND BLACKOUT POETRY

When considering possible approaches to analyse the rich data we generated through the dialogues and reflections, we searched for methods which would adequately capture the multiplicity of our experiences and multidirectionality of our insights. While we were tempted to rely on the familiar analytical methods which seek patterns and group data into codes and larger themes, this approach alone would impose linearity to our experiences and reflections, reducing their authenticity and ultimately richness. Instead, we decided to follow the rhizome, a botanical concept extrapolated from the science of botany to challenge unidirectional views of human experience. Proposed and developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the rhizome, with its growth underneath the surface visible to the eye and extending in multiple directions at once, is argued to more adequately represent human learning and development. The rhizome, such as wild growing common strawberry plant, spreads in many directions, setting roots where favourable conditions seem to exist, often defying the logic of what is possible, reasonable or achievable. This fluid and multidirectional approach to data has been used before to analyse developmental contexts such as transitions, for instance transition to higher education (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018; Gravett, 2021) or EAP students' pathway to their disciplinary discourse community (Dippold, Heron & Gravett 2022). This non-linear, multiplicity-driven approach, which allowed for multiple entry and exit points, resonated powerfully with our interdisciplinary intentions. It provided a framework wherein diverse ideas could coexist, intermingle, and influence each other without needing to follow a prescribed path.

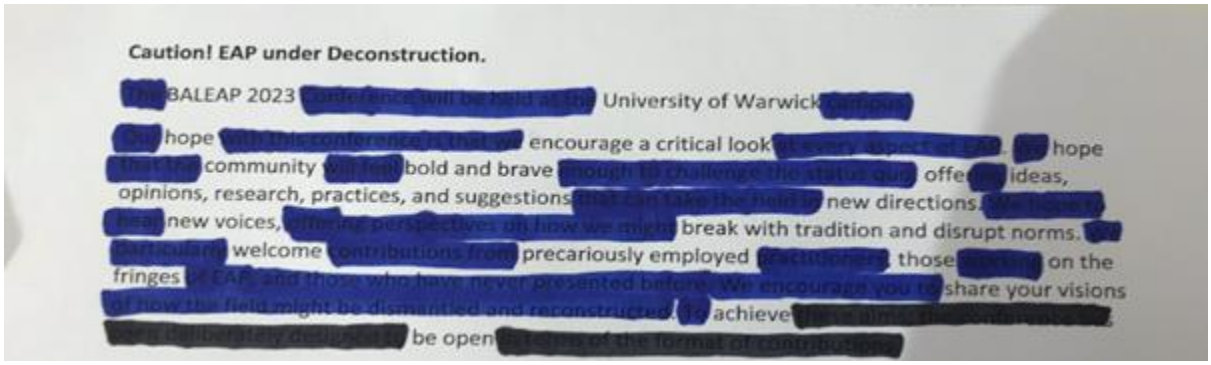
This analytical approach challenged us to move beyond the boundaries of disciplinary silos. It prompted us to consider the myriad connections between ideas, weaving them into a cohesive whole. The rhizomatic lens compelled us to acknowledge and celebrate the messy, unpredictable, and organic nature of our collaborative endeavour. It served as a reminder that knowledge creation is not a straightforward process; it thrives on intersections, diversions, and serendipitous encounters.

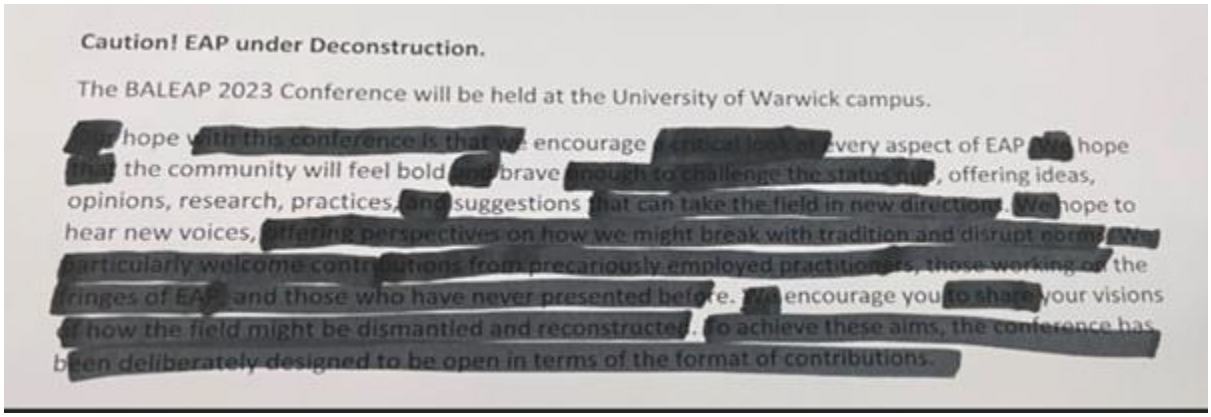
Our use of blackout poetry allowed us to enact the rhizomatic principles in practice and facilitated an alternative channel of communication introducing creativity into our research.

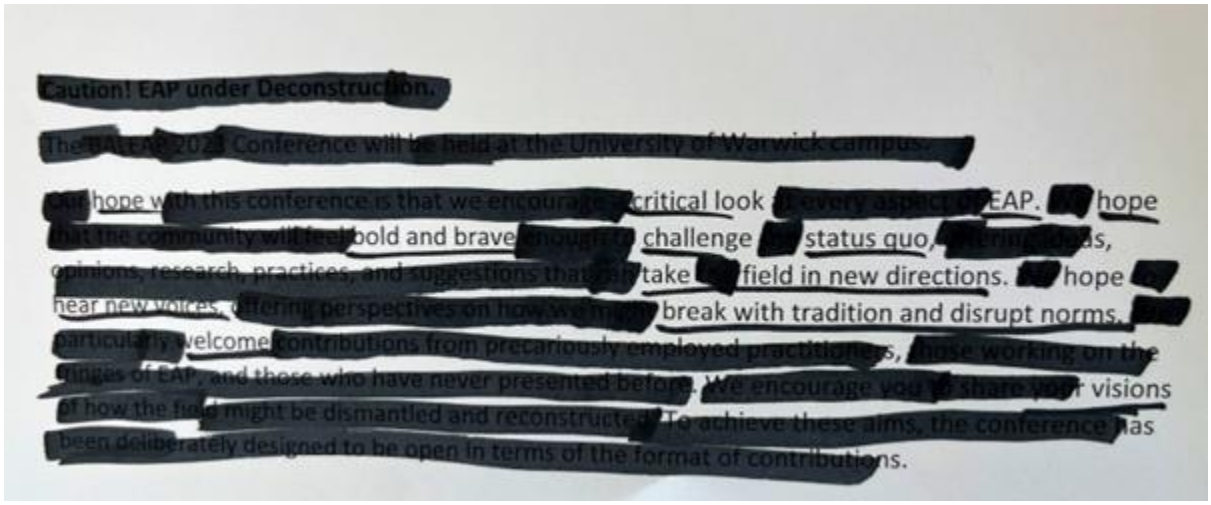
Blackout Poetry, at its core, is an art of erasure. It invites us to look at a piece of text and envision something else within it, to reimagine it by selectively blacking out words, and letting others stand out. What remains can be both profound and poetic. Yet, when incorporated within our research framework, this approach transcended mere artistry. It served as an analytical tool, fostering deeper engagement with the primary data - the transcripts of our reflections and conversations, while also shedding light on hidden interpretations. This dynamic way of analysing data allowed for an explorative dive into the subconscious meanings and underrepresented interconnections within our research. The poems we individually created from our reflections and discussions encapsulated our hesitations, diversity of our experiences and our transformative journeys. They stood as testaments to the multiplicities of interpretations and the often-untapped potential within academic texts to speak to diverse audiences.

When presenting our research to the audience of the 2023 BALEAP conference, we hoped that our rhizomatic progressions in the format of blackout poetry would be of interest to the community and were not disappointed. The poems created during the session show the strength of rhizomatic analysis pointing to the diversity of the attendees' individual views and beliefs, painting a broader and much richer picture of our collective sensitivities and experiences of the conference. Three of such poems, posted publicly on X by the workshop participants are shared below to illustrate this approach to data:

Figure 1 shows three such poems, posted publicly on X by the workshop participants are shared below to illustrate this approach to data:







In combining blackout poetry, duoethnography, and rhizomatic analysis, we endeavoured to create a research framework that was as innovative as it was inclusive. These methods, with their inherent emphasis on creativity, dialogue, and non-linearity, stood in stark contrast to traditional research approaches, challenging us to reimagine the very nature and purpose of academic inquiry. The interplay between them underlined the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and open-mindedness in the quest for deeper understanding. However, when trying to translate these creative ways of knowledge making and collaboration, it wasn't always easy to directly transfer it into writing…

PRESSURE TO CONFORM: A DANCE BETWEEN TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Our initial foray into this collaborative research was marked by a shared commitment to principles of creativity, dialogue, and an ethic of care and love. This was a continuation of our prior engagement within the EAP for Social Justice SIG, a space where we had begun to build trust and open

ourselves to vulnerability. However, as we explored the writing phase deeper, we found ourselves grappling with unexpected sites of resistance. Our intention to depart from the rigid conventions of academic writing occasionally faltered, as we unwittingly reverted to the very formats we aimed to challenge. This tension between our transformative writing goals and the ingrained habits of standard academic form served as a significant point of reflection. How could we truly break free from these constraints while still ensuring our work was received and respected within the academic community?

In navigating these challenges, we turned to multiple reflection circles, spaces where we could candidly share our struggles and recalibrate our approach. It was here that the importance of building trust and creating a safe space for vulnerability became abundantly clear. We acknowledged that the process of transformation was not linear, and that we needed to constantly check in with our guiding principles, ensuring they remained at the forefront of our work.

As we reflect on the recycling of deleted material, we recognize that even the bits left on the cutting room floor played a crucial role in our journey. These discarded fragments served as reminders of our evolving thought processes, and the iterative nature of transformative writing. They were not failures, but rather stepping stones, guiding us towards a richer, more nuanced understanding of our work.

Our decision to incorporate blackout poetry infused our research with an unexpected vibrancy. A novel methodology that redefines and recreates meanings from existing texts - we transcribed our conversations, and it took our collaborative dialogue a step further. Instead of conversing amongst ourselves, the text became a living entity, contributing to our discourse. The resultant poems, brimming with innovative interpretations, were emblematic of this methodology's prowess. They weren't mere outcomes; they were central to our introspection, enabling us to glean deeper insights and extend them to the broader academic community.

In our endeavour, the writings of bell hooks (2008) resonated deeply, emphasising communal learning. We grappled with a dichotomy—our desire for transformative writing clashed with traditional academic methodologies that prioritise conventional knowledge building. Our introspection led us to question the essence of our educational engagement. And as we pondered, we realised the need for a paradigm shift—from standard research methodologies towards a more organic, dialogic framework. Embracing duoethnography and blackout poetry, our methods weren't just about discussing transformative techniques; they were transformation incarnate.

In summary, our journey showcased a delicate dance between innovation and tradition, urging us, and hopefully our readers, to question, redefine, and embrace a more genuine, transformative approach to academic writing.

CONCLUSION

As we navigated the intricate landscape of our research journey, we were continually struck by the power of collaborative inquiry. The trioethnographic method, combined with the dynamic nature of blackout poetry, allowed us to confront, question, and challenge the established paradigms of educational research. As educators and researchers, we found ourselves on a path of constant self-reflection, challenging our own assumptions and pushing the boundaries of conventional academic discourse.

Our collective exploration into social justice within the realm of English for Academic Purposes illuminated the complexities of professional identity, the power dynamics embedded in educational systems, and the transformative potential of dialogue and creativity. It is clear that our work, though rooted in specific methodologies and subject areas, holds implications far beyond the immediate context. It speaks to a broader call for reimagining the ways in which we conduct research, teach, and engage with academic communities.

The feedback from our BALEAP workshop participant encapsulates the heart of our message: the urgent need for equity, inclusivity, and collaboration in education. Yet, as we conclude our reflections, we also acknowledge that our work is but a starting point. The challenges we faced, the insights we gained, and the questions we continue to grapple with form a narrative of ongoing exploration. As we move forward, we are reminded of the imperative to continually challenge the status quo, to remain open to diverse perspectives, and to ensure that our pedagogical approaches are grounded in an ethic of care.

We conclude with a renewed sense of purpose, inspired by the transformative potential of our methodologies and driven by our collective aspiration for a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. Our hope is that fellow educators, researchers, and practitioners, upon engaging with our work, will feel compelled to embark on their own journeys of exploration, challenge, and growth, contributing to the broader tapestry of change in the academic world.

MANIFESTO FOR CREATIVE KNOWLEDGE-MAKING AND COLLABORATION IN EAP: EMBRACE UNCONVENTIONAL NARRATIVES: A CALL TO EAP PRACTITIONERS

As we navigate the principles guiding our approach, it is crucial to revisit and re-emphasize the foundational tenets of our Manifesto for Creative Knowledge-Making and Collaboration in EAP. This manifesto is a call to EAP practitioners to embrace unconventional narratives, celebrate diverse perspectives, and challenge traditional academic norms. By doing so, we aim to foster richer, more inclusive dialogues that go beyond monologue, utilizing innovative methods such as trioethnography, and blackout poetry.

Our commitment to building trust and embracing vulnerability is central to authentic research, creating safe spaces for genuine collaboration. Inspired by the 'love ethic' of bell hooks, we advocate for a pedagogy of care that transforms learning environments through empathy and understanding. Acknowledging the non-linear nature of knowledge, we value the detours and fragments that contribute to our intellectual journeys.

Rooted in community, our manifesto envisions knowledge-building as a collective endeavour, encouraging us to learn from and lean on one another. We strive to shift paradigms, moving away from formulaic methodologies towards organic, dialogic approaches that inspire change and advocate for social justice in higher education. Let this manifesto be our guide as we navigate and reshape the landscape of EAP together.

1. Celebrate Diverse Perspectives: EAP is not just about language, but also about people and their diverse experiences. Let's bring every voice, every story, and every experience to the table.
2. Challenge the Norm: Academic conventions, while useful, can sometimes act as chains. Break free and find new ways to present knowledge that speaks to the heart as well as the intellect.
3. Foster Dialogue Over Monologue: Engage in duoethnography and trioethnography. Let conversations between researchers be the centrepiece, revealing layers of depth and understanding that traditional methods might overlook.
4. Re-imagine and Re-create with Blackout Poetry: Use this innovative tool to engage with existing texts in new ways. Find hidden meanings, uncover new interpretations, and let the texts speak to us and through us.

5. Build Trust and Embrace Vulnerability: Authentic research comes from a place of trust and vulnerability. Foster safe spaces where genuine sharing and collaboration can occur.
6. Pedagogy of Care: Rooted in bell hooks' 'love ethic,' let's cultivate learning environments that prioritise empathy, love, and understanding. Care is transformative.
7. Embrace the Non-linear: The path to knowledge isn't always a straight line. Recognize the value in detours, in revisited ideas, and in the "cutting room floor" fragments that shape our thought processes.
8. Rooted in Community: Inspired by bell hooks, learning is not just an individual endeavour. It's communal. Let's build knowledge together, leaning on and learning from one another.
9. Shift the Paradigm: Move away from formulaic approaches. Allow organic, dialogic methodologies to shape our understanding and our presentation of knowledge in the EAP domain.
10. Catalyze Change Through Scholarly Activism: Beyond just discussing, let's act. Let our research inspire change, advocate for social justice, and influence higher education landscapes.

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Notes

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