

Article

Great-Grandmother, Grandmother, Mother, and Me: A Search for My Roots through Research-based theatre

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Abstract: In this article I present how I use Research-based theatre (RbT) to better comprehend my own roots, history, and multiple selves. The purpose of this research project is also for me to explore RbT before I invite my oral storytelling students to do the same. Using RbT as my central methodology, I have explored my own and others' narratives by using an aesthetic, arts-based approach. Drama conventions used as research methods serve as a catalyst for opening up creative processes and generating a desire to dig more deeply into stories of my maternal ancestry.

Keywords: Research-based theatre; autoethnodrama; drama conventions; narrative; roots

1. Introduction

In the middle of an open and colourful landscape in Spain, in the spring of 2023, I found myself in a state of calm. At the same time, I was also curious and full of expectations for the upcoming week. Drama and theatre colleagues from around world had gathered to explore Research-based theatre (RbT).¹ In a workshop at the beginning of the week, I spoke to a lovely, warm, and wise colleague² who, after hearing some of my stories, said that she was so curious about my roots. We had been walking and talking beforehand and were both enamoured with a lush tree that was blooming so beautifully in the spring sun.



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From left to right: Grandmother Margit, Great-grandmother Hanna, Mother Torhild, and me, Mette. Photographer: Reidar Bøe.



From left: Mette Bøe Lyngstad and Nisha Sajani in front of the flowering tree. Photo: Selfie.

She said she regarded that tree as a picture of me and my roots. This meeting was the catalyst for me to start the process of searching for my own roots and writing down the narratives of the women in my family who came before me. I aim to inquire into this autobiographical journey through RbT processes, which will invite me to learn more about RbT methodology. Hopefully, the readers of this article will be inspired to use RbT to search for their own roots. The aesthetic learning processes will also be highlighted in this article, as I wish to discover ways in which RbT and narrative inquiry intersect.

2. Material and Methods

In RbT, theatre and academic research are interwoven, and most often include theatre, art-based research, and qualitative research methodologies (Lea and Belliveau 2020). Understood thus, RbT differs from other research approaches in the field of performing and visual arts as it interweaves the scholarly and the aesthetic (Shigematsu et al. 2021, 2022). Most of my research in narrative inquiry to date involves working with narratives over a long period of time (Lyngstad and Blix 2023; Lyngstad 2021), and I have never performed the results as an autoethnodrama or research-based play. I am not accustomed to using an aesthetic form for my research results. According to Saldaña (2008), autoethnodrama is “an autobiographical cultural story in play script format intended for performance” (p. 177). He goes on to explain that autoethnodrama “draws primarily from the writer’s personal experiences and memories, which are then documented as a monologue intended for performance by the writer him- or herself” (p. 177).

In this research project, I have used several research methods, including various dramatic conventions that I have introduced into RbT workshops or previously used myself in teaching. I have also studied photos, genealogies, and written notes and made a physical expedition to an uninhabited family home where my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother once lived. These all became important parts of my data material. After constructing the four women’s stories, I took a thematic analysis approach, looked for similarities and differences, and combined them into one narrative for four generations. What was most difficult was writing my own story, particularly with regard to what I thought would interest others. When I identified the theme in the other three women’s stories, it became easier for me to see myself accordingly. I think that the theme I have been focusing on in the other stories also says a lot about me.

Since my mother and I are the only ones still alive, I had several conversations with relatives and friends of my great-grandmother and grandmother to gain a better understanding of them. I talked with my great-grandmother’s foster daughter, my grandmother’s youngest son, my cousin, a family friend, and my mother. The family members I talked with were all orally informed about the ongoing research project. I decided not to tape-record for ethical reasons and took notes instead. They were all invited to read the autoethnodrama afterwards.

I have already presented the story to colleagues and friends to see whether it is of interest, or if it resonates with others. According to their feedback, they also recognised

parts of me in the other women stories within my maternal ancestry. I aim to perform the autoethnodrama for an audience to further inform my RbT process. I will collect ideas and movements I find as I rehearse for the piece and try them out as part of the performance.

Lea and Belliveau (2020) present several dramatic conventions and exercises that are used in their RbT work. In several workshops with them, I have explored how various conventions offer unique entries into my family history. In this article, I will show how my experiences with a few of the exercises have propelled me more deeply into the memory of my relatives. Most of the exercises were not new to me, but the circumstances and outcome were different.

2.1. RbT as a Catalyst

I held the old and worn serving tray carefully with both hands as I quietly slid across the floor. I had to be careful not to be spotted. I did not feel that I was in my great-grandmother's kitchen: I felt I was my great-grandmother. The object helped me to find her movements in my memories. . .

This took place in the drama room.³ We were asked to take an object from the drama room and create a situation that we could use it in. I found an old serving tray and immediately tried to walk with it like I imagined my great-grandmother would. A memory that became clearer to me through this work was noticing my great-grandmother in her kitchen throwing some fresh food she could not eat into the garbage. It felt like she had become ashamed of throwing out food. My grandmother was small and skinny. Maybe she did not want her daughter—my grandmother, who lived in the same house—to worry about her not being able to eat her food.

The embodied work in the drama workshop made me even more interested in getting to know my great-grandmother, so I started to plan and explore my journey into the past. I started to think about other dramatic conventions that I would like to bring into the RbT process. I wanted to explore more of my ancestor's movements. When we were working in pairs and interviewing each other in role, it enabled us to focus more and play out the status and movements of these 'characters'. These open creative processes allowed us to combine some facts with fiction.

2.2. Freedom on Wheels

The task was to find the essence in your work and contain it in one sentence: "This is a story about. . .".

"This is a story about a woman's freedom!" I say silently, as tears come to the corners of my eyes. I better understood the importance of my grandmother getting a driving licence and buying a car as a widow at the age of 55. The workshop leader gave us a hint for going more deeply into the story we were working with. We tried different entries into our story, and I gradually understood more about my grandmother. At the time of my birth, my grandmother was having a hip operation but during the process suffered an infection. As a result, she lost her mobility in one foot and had to walk with crutches for the rest of her life. When she became a widow seven years later, her youngest son was still living at home. She decided to get a driving licence. To do this, she had to travel to Norway's second-biggest city Bergen for driving lessons, which was very different to what she was used to: a small island without a single traffic light. It took her six weeks of lessons. My grandmother's actions of acquiring her driver's license made a profound impression on me. It is interesting to realise that her age then was the same as mine now. Her first car was a little orange Volvo, and she often said that she would rather sell her house than her car. The car enabled her to visit friends, take them out for a ride, and even bring them to her home for a visit.

I remember being so proud of my grandmother, because despite being a widow with a youngster at home, she managed to find a way out of her isolation. However, it is also painful to think about what she missed out on and could not experience to the same level: walking in the forest and picking blueberries or going out in a boat to fish. It would upset

me every time she asked us to take away her crutch just before visitors came, as if no one would be able to see that she lived with a disability, although everyone knew about it.

In the fall of 2023, I was about to travel to the island where all three of these women had been raised when a strange event drew me closer to my roots than I was prepared for. Outside my house, the stairs were slippery. As I was carrying the rubbish out, I slipped on the stairs and fell all the way down the steps. Although quite badly injured, I insisted on going to my previously arranged appointments on the island the next day. While settling myself into the car, I needed to make the same movements as my grandmother to get into the car and found myself having the same thoughts as those she related to me when the two of us were on a journey: "If they tell me to step out of the car on the ferry, I won't be able to travel".

2.3. *Between Three Mothers*

In one of the RbT workshops, we were asked to secretly choose two people in the group to connect our movements in the room to, so that we secretly made an invisible triangle.

When one member of your triangle moved, you also needed to move, because the distance between the three people needed to be the same. The equilateral triangle could, however, change its position and size.

Could this movement be a picture of the three mothers before me? The importance of finding your own position relative to those before you could relate to a symbolic picture between my grandmother, my mother, and I during my teenage years. I remember my grandmother staying at our house several months a year and observing my relationship with my mother: "The two of you are too similar, that's why your relationship uses up so much energy". In my journey into the past, I had to find out more about how the three women before me influenced my life. I was searching for different ways to get to know them now, especially while my mum is still alive. To do so, I decided to explore the physical rooms and spaces they have all been a part of and talk to people who knew them well.

2.4. *My Journey into the Past*

A way to strengthen a person's memory is to find small objects that belong to the past and which help you to better understand the present and the future.

In particular, I needed to visit Solheim, the old family farm on the island, where these three women lived at the same time from 1948 to 1964.



Solheim, the house my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother lived. Photo: Mette Bøe Lyngstad.

My mother and grandmother both grew up in the house pictured above, and I spent a huge part of my summer holidays there with my grandmother. As soon as I was old enough to travel alone, I would journey for many hours by boat to visit her and stay several weeks alone with her until the rest of my family came over. I have a clear picture of my grandmother sitting in the car at the dock, waiting for me to arrive, her narrow head with its white hair and happy face that barely came above the steering wheel. We were both ready to cross the island by car, talking and singing.

When I started to plan my visit to the island in 2023, I contacted several people who knew my three maternal ancestors. The first person I contacted was my great-grandmother's neighbour. She told me that my grandmother moved into a flat in their house when they had just married, and that the kitchen was still intact. I needed to go back and touch the kitchen bench and look out of the same window. And so I did. . .



A room with a view, the kitchen in the first flat my grandfather and grandmother lived together. Photo: Torhild Bøe.

I also needed to visit the house where my great-grandmother had been raised. Through this visit, I discovered that the story of her growing up in this house was totally new to me. The new owner of the house was not there, so I had to observe it from the outside. What touched me the most was the huge tree beside the house, which looked like it was protecting the house in some way, and it reminded me of the statement about roots and wings.

At Solheim, the house where all three women had lived at one point in their lives was now abandoned, making my visit to this former family property a sad one.

When visiting both houses where my grandmother and grandfather lived together, I remembered feelings of being there with them. Solheim was the last place they lived together. Here, I found my grandmother's chair vacant.



Grandmother's kitchen chair. Photo: Mette Bøe Lyngstad.

2.5. The Open House

To get a better understanding of place, I prefer to work more directly with different dramatic conventions. Potential examples could include (1) marking your room: taping the outline of the house, filling it with memories and objects, and marking the things with the tape; (2) letting the participants stand side by side, on the lines that mark the walls: what does the door know? what has it seen? and how does it understand the figures'

movements in the room? and (3) walking in the room (as if it were three-dimensional) as you tell your story and try to describe the fictive place. Similarly, I would like to make a tableau out of the situations I remember and freeze a moment to explore it better. In these situations, I could go deeper into the tableau by bringing in different drama techniques, such as tapping in to discover thoughts of the people in the tableau, saying the lines, doing an interview with the figure, or letting all of the participants in the tableau start a movement. These different dramatic conventions may all create an opening for the participants to get to know the place or the story better.

While talking to some of the people who had been around these three maternal ancestors, what struck me most was how all three of them had filled their homes with family and friends, and how their homes seemed to be good places both to live in and to visit. I felt inspired by them and recognized that I was similar to these women. Nonetheless, there was one huge difference. All of these women filled their homes with great handwork and they were all very good at it, and I unfortunately am not! By introducing knitting as an object/activity to refine family narratives, I found an opening for my storytelling performance; from there on, the story came step by step. The physical act of knitting became a metaphor to begin weaving, stitching together my autoethnodramatic story.

My RbT process emerged into an autoethnodrama where I try to build bridges between myself and the three important mothers before me. I plan to stage the narrative below as an open performance for an audience.

2.6. My Autoethnodrama

My Great-grandmother, My Grandmother, My Mother, and Me—an autoethnodrama.



4 generations gathered on the day of the baptism. Safe in my grandmother's lap, close to my mother and great-grandmother. Photo: Aksel Tofte

I sit on stage, knitting and humming the tune from “Emerge from oblivion”. After a few moments, I show that I am struggling with the knitting, and I stop knitting and start the narrative.⁴

I've always dreamt of being a knitting girl, like my mother Torhild, my grandmother Margit, and my great-grandmother Hanna. My great-grandmother knitted a wool sock every day, and it was often necessary to keep all her daughters warm. She had given birth to eight and she took in two foster daughters after being widowed at the age of forty.

I bring in a soundtrack from a knitting machine.

My grandmother Margit had her own knitting machine and admitted to having knitted more than she ever wanted to see in one place. It is said that she knitted for people on the island to remedy the mischief her son got up to in their village. Whether this was right is hard to know, but the fact that she took her driving exam at the age of 56, after being

widowed, speaks volumes. She had to keep up with her son. I vividly remember being on a drive with her to find out who he had gone after on a summer fling. Grandmother was furious when he first came home, but nothing affected him: he was in love. "Once you've met the woman in your life, you must follow her", he had said when he finally showed up. And he was right. Now, 40 years on, they still walk side by side.

My mother, Torhild, doesn't have a knitting machine but she is like a knitting machine.

I start to move around the stage, doing a lot of housekeeping and knitting in between. I show fast knitting moves.

She knits very quickly and incredibly evenly, and you can just feed her a pattern in order for tight-finished sweaters to soon emerge.

Here, I will try to knit, with samples of my grandmother's and mother's knitting behind me and by my side. I stop knitting, pretending that I've failed, and throw it away.

I'm hopeless at knitting, but I've tried. In the eighth grade, we were knitting wool socks, and I was knitting and knitting to reach the finish. I was even knitting while lying in my tent at Scouts camp. And I did reach the finish, or so I thought until the grade came: "G" for good. Why just good? Here I had done my best and I couldn't perform any better than this? My socks were uneven, and the wedge, I suppose, was tight. The wedge, I heard myself say. Isn't that academic language? Not bad at all, I must have inherited something. But given the three talented needleworking women who had come before me, I was committed to doing better. So, I chose needlework in the ninth grade to demonstrate that I could do better, and I fought my way up to a very good grade. But I've never since put on the grandmother's nightwear that I sewed.

I try to put on an old night gown. Then, I start walking like a pregnant mother, breathing almost like when a birth starts.

All three of the women before me gave birth to several daughters. My great-grandmother had eight, while my grandmother and my mother had two each. Twelve girls in all from these three, an entire football team with one in reserve. No wonder there weren't any left for me. I had to arrange my own reserves, by borrowing other girls and becoming a spare mum. It helps, in the otherwise boy-dominated world I live in. I love that world, but I don't have a daughter who can tell you about the women who have influenced her, such as me. Maybe that's why I'm so keen to tell you about the mothers before me.

In addition to caring for their own families, they had other jobs, within or outside of the home. "If I could have afforded it, I'd love to have adopted Oddny", my great-grandmother said to her foster daughter's husband. This warmed Oddny, who was the youngest of the 10 girls that my great-grandmother raised. She always felt loved, even though she knew this was a paid job for her foster mother, Hanna, who needed the money to keep her farm after being widowed. And that must have been a new thought for her, having been married to the foreman of the factory. Hanna had been hardworking and efficient, despite her small, lean body.

I start to pack herring, very quickly.

My grandmother Margit had worked at the herring factory on the island, and she was a whiz at packing herring. She was proud of her job and loved being with the others at work. She was once caught laughing. Grandmother understood that she had to show the kind of family she came from; after all, her father had been the foreman of the factory. So, she made sure she worked fast and efficiently. She packed and packed. Not a single herring went to waste. Her sister said the others at work were frustrated by my grandmother's pace. Because she was so efficient, the management used her pace to calculate the base salary. This was not fair for the others, who were far from being able to match her pace.

I start to move around and multitask.

My mother is also always quick and efficient in her work. I recognise that, and I have to smile when my colleagues call me the lightning wing. Then, I know who I have inherited it from.

Unfortunately, there is an important detail that separates us. Where my mother is always careful about following the recipe when baking or having all her buns the same size, this is far from being the case with me. As long as the buns are large and tall and taste good, they can be uneven.

I act as if I'm baking.

When out driving, my mother and grandmother would draw attention to farms that were well tended.

I point to a house and start to talk like my mother and grandmother.

From them I learnt that all four sides of your house should be nice and clean, so it's no wonder I went for a villa where I could reach all four sides. . .

My mother always likes to learn something new.

I start demonstrating some of her hobbies.

She regularly takes courses: lampshade making, Japanese embroidery, porcelain painting, wood carving, felting, etc. I also love taking courses, or at least holding courses. Although these are not related to needlework, they are nevertheless linked to professionalism, but professionalism in drama and theatre.

Going to the abandoned house that the three women before me had lived in made me feel especially nostalgic. Despite the house seeming abandoned, its stories seemed to be in its walls. The house was open and light and centrally located in the middle of the island. Rural and airy, with a large tree almost resting on it. The house and garden were made for many people and for large gatherings, just like my own house in Bergen today. Hanna was living in one part of the house in Solheim, while Margit was living with her family in the another part of the large homestead.

If there was anything in particular that these women at Solheim could do, it was to open their homes for family and guests. All were welcome, young and old. They took pride in having a clean and shiny house. Here I differ from these women before me. I'm not particularly good at cleaning. Though, I'm good at getting people to clean for me! But often there's usually just as much to clean after people have helped as there was before.

I speak out:

"Do not stress, Mum, I don't clean the floor just before I have visitors, because I know I'll have to clean it again afterwards."

Then, I enter the role of my mum, shaking my head, sighing, and saying:

"You didn't inherit this from me. No wonder you have time to have a lot of guests."

All of us mothers like decorating our homes. My mum and I think it's extra fun to use the serving platters that some of these women before us had in their own kitchens. My predecessors' relationship with their home and their exemplary care of it can be linked to the fact that all of them were homemakers for much of their lives. Their home was their pride, their stage, their main arena. I, on the other hand, have the drama room and theatre as my main arenas. This is what gives me most energy.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to discover how the three women before me worked together with others and flourished from it. That doesn't mean it wasn't hard work for them, because it seems that it was. The fact that my great-grandmother was a foster mother creates a special bond between us, as I have been a visiting mother for eight years to a pair of twins. The difference, however, is that I don't do it for financial reasons but because I

only have two children of my own. I have time for it and it gives me a lot of energy . . . as well as frustration and worry at times though!

I pick up an old newspaper and start flipping through it.

Hanna was proud that it was her husband, Kristian, who had bought the land to build their house on. Back then, it was full of woods, almost like a forest. But it didn't matter, because they had hands to work with, and stone by stone, tree by tree, they cleared the plot and prepared the land to build their home. Little did Hanna know then what significance this house at Solheim would have for family and friends for many generations to come. Fortunately, she also didn't know how to abandon the house and let it fall into disrepair.



An abandoned house. Photo: Mette Bøe Lyngstad.

The more I know of the women before me, the more I realise how much they have influenced me in my own life. There is much that serves to bind the four of us together—not just what we have, but what we don't have. What the four women in my story have in common is that we all lack a significant body part, which has had an impact on our lives. While my grandmother, mother, and I have had surgery to remove a body part as the result of illness, the situation was different for my great-grandmother. Her first visit to a doctor was when she was more than eighty years of age. While cleaning the ceiling one day, she accidentally lost contact with the chair beneath her, and ended up hanging from a hook in the ceiling and dangling in the air. She lost half a finger and fell to the floor, but still did not visit a doctor after that incident.

My great-grandmother lived on with nine-and-a-half fingers, as if this were the most natural thing. I remember being fascinated and proud of how well she handled it. Likewise, I was proud of my grandmother, who had to walk with a crutch for the last 25 years of her life. My mother became seriously ill not long after my little sister was born, but she survived it and continues to do well. Her tenacity and courage are probably what gave me hope and strength in my own battle with cancer, with two boys aged one and three at the time. My boys felt very optimistic for me. After my breast cancer surgery, when I asked them if it was harder with one or two boobs, the youngest quickly showed one finger in the air. But they saw and understood far more than they showed. In a national radio interview about death on Norges Riks Kringkasting (NRK), the eldest, then aged five, was asked if he was afraid that his mother would die of cancer. He immediately replied: "I wasn't afraid, I knew it was going to be okay. But she was scared".



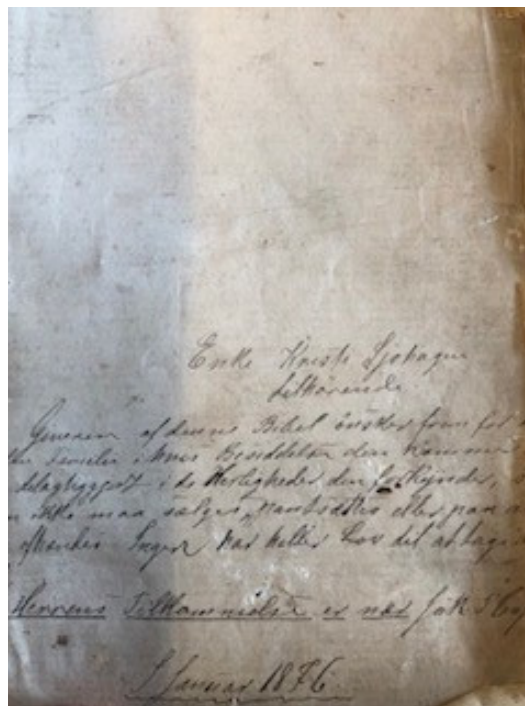
The old bible.

I sit down, open the old Bible, and read aloud.

The widow Kristi Sjøhagen writes: The giver of this Bible wants above all that the family who is in possession of it partake in the glory it preaches, and that it must not be sold, mortgaged, or otherwise disposed of. Nor is anyone allowed to put it in debt.

The coming of the Lord is near! Jakop 5.8

January 1, 1876"



The message inside the Bible from Kristi Sjøhagen. Photo: Mette Bøe Lyngstad.

My great-grandmother seems to have been proud and thankful that she was the one to inherit the family's Bible. Although she was a believer and convinced in her faith, she did not speak about it. Perhaps she considered faith a private matter. I am sure she occasionally wondered who would inherit the Bible from her, just as I wonder which of my future great-grandchildren will inherit it from me. . .

I will always be thankful for my mother's, grandmother's, and great-grandmother's life wisdom, and I will keep it as an inner compass as I continue my life's journey.

I start to knit again as I sing an old Norwegian melody.

3. Discussion

Since “life is storied”, you will find that “identity is created and expressed through narrative” (Blix 2017, p. 65). My experience is that identity grows in connection with others, and this project has allowed me to find new identities by mirroring myself in others’ narratives (Lyngstad 2016, 2017).

Although the narratives within this article have taken place over several generations, I find it exciting and challenging to weave these four women’s stories together into an autoethnodrama. It has been difficult to decide what to focus on and what to exclude. I have chosen themes such as being a mother, working, health, and housekeeping, which were a central part of everyone’s lives. I find myself connecting to all of these themes, even the theme of illness, which these women did not talk about much but which I know was an important part of them.

I found it is easier to describe aspects of these three women in my family, than to write about myself, though, after having had cancer, it made me realise how important it is to tell your own story while you can. This process has also been important for me, because through these intergenerational stories I have tried to make sense of our existence. Stories can help us to make meaning. “This process of meaning making is a relational endeavour. We need someone to co-compose meaningful stories with, and we need someone else’s stories to confirm our own” (Blix et al. 2021, p. 586). In my case, I needed to tell this story to close friends first, from whom I received feedback that I was too inconspicuous and too critical of myself. A friend commented: “I recognised you in all these women”. But I am still looking forward to playing it out and putting it on stage, because then I will be able to see how the stage directions might work in performance and ways in which they support the narrative.

Another difficulty was writing the poetic story in English rather than in my native Norwegian language, as each language has its own rhythms and nuances. What lies ahead for me is the staging of the narrative, and although I have offered a few stage directions, I hope to discover further insights through the embodying of the story. I will be open to see how bodily expressions in rehearsing the piece will offer a poetic physical language in tandem with the scripted narrative.

As long as it remains an autoethnodrama, it will be easier for me to describe the scenes on stage to myself. As a storyteller, I am more accustomed to working out the movements when I start to work on the floor. I try to write out the narratives in sequence so that they are easier to learn the text by heart. Even then, there is scope for improvisation and discoveries.

4. Conclusions

In this RbT process, I have found a new way of presenting my research data in an aesthetic form. This fits with my interest in narrative research. Although I have previously used narrative inquiry to listen to shared stories and write them down for analysis, I have never written an autoethnodrama before. This has been an inspiring way of getting to understand my roots better, as well as a way of seeing the importance of talking to several people to form a clearer picture of my own family. Not every word needs to be spoken, and not every question needs to be stated. This process has offered a way of learning more about the importance of what is between the lines, as well as getting to know a person better by stepping into her shoes by way of physical expression. In my exploration of RbT, it was important to add some more drama conventions in the RbT processes, to achieve a deeper understanding of the themes that emerged in my inquiry.

The creative processes I have been through have convinced me that this will also be an important and challenging process for my own students, and I am looking forward to walking along this path with them.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The workshops were led by George Belliveau, Graham Lea, Tetsuro Shigematsu, Christina Cook, Kathryn Dawson, and Joe Salvatore.
- ² Nisha Sajjani.
- ³ George Belliveau was leading a RbT workshop for Master's students and colleagues at my institution, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, in February 2023.
- ⁴ The stage directions will maintain a regular font, while the script *is in italics* to signal the performative aspects.

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