

RESEARCHING TEACHER EDUCATION PRACTICES

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES, DEMANDS, AND EXPECTATIONS OF SELF-STUDY

John Loughran
Monash University

This article explores the nature of self-study of teacher education practices by examining what self-study is and how it might be conducted and reported. In working through these ideas, the article makes an argument for the need for learning through self-study to be documented in ways that might not only be accessible to others but also meaningful for their practice in teaching about teaching. Although the term self-study suggests a singular and individual approach to researching practice, the reality is that self-studies are dramatically strengthened by drawing on alternative perspectives and reframing of situations, thus data, ideas, and input that necessitate moving beyond the self. Moving beyond the self also matters because a central purpose in self-study is uncovering deeper understandings of the relationship between teaching about teaching and learning about teaching. This article argues a need for these deeper understandings to be developed in ways that enhance an articulation of a pedagogy of teacher education.

Keywords: *pedagogy of teacher education; professional knowledge of practice; reflection; self-study; teacher education; teaching about teaching*

Research on teaching practice by teachers holds invaluable promise for developing new understandings and producing new knowledge about teaching and learning. Formalizing such study of practice through self-study is imperative. . . . The value of self-study depends on the researcher/teacher providing convincing evidence that they know what they claim to know.

—Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998, p. 243)

The history and context of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices have been described in detail elsewhere (Loughran, 2004); however, suffice to say, an important aspect of self-study that is crucial in understanding this methodology is embedded in the desire of teacher educators to better align their teaching intents with their teaching actions. Because teacher educators teach teaching, it is inevitable

that the nature of practice itself, with its inherent contradictions and tensions, affects the manner in which such practice is researched. When the researcher and the practitioner are one and the same, careful scrutiny of what is being done, how and why, becomes all the more important if the outcomes are to genuinely affect understandings of practice beyond the individual self. In many ways then, it is not difficult to see how the allure of self-study can sometimes overshadow some of these issues and create complications in reporting that may not be so apparent to the individual researcher yet be disconcerting for others: It is a tension that cannot be ignored.

The possibility that this tension might go unaddressed in self-study is what Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) were concerned about when they highlighted the need to formalize that

which might be described as teacher research by teacher educators and has become embodied in the term *self-study*. Hamilton and Pinnegar's concerns have also been built on and extended by many others leading to a general call for a focus on scholarship: a focus that needs to be seriously considered if the value of self-study is to be more fully apprehended and demonstrated rather than overlooked or simply dismissed.

As one way of considering scholarship, it is well worth being reminded of Boyer's (1990) view of what he thought it meant to be a scholar and the nature of scholarship itself. Boyer drew attention to the need for academia to develop a more integrated and holistic understanding of teaching and research. Further to this, Shulman (1999) built on these ideas by introducing the notion of scholarship of teaching suggesting that such scholarship depended on at least three key attributes: becoming public, becoming an object of critical review and evaluation by members of that community, and members of that community beginning to use, build on, and develop those acts of mind and creation. These key attributes of scholarship of teaching are commensurate with notions of scholarship in self-study as they clearly go to the heart of that which shapes the way quality self-study might be conducted because

Like any good research self-study must represent rigorous data gathering and analysis. Data sources should be stable and empirical. Methods must be transparent. Quantitative methods have a place. In making sense of the data, public theory is crucially important. Privileging private over public theory opens the door to romanticism and invites self-justification, two seductive outcomes that only stable data and rigorous analysis can constrain. This is not merely an epistemological matter, it is a moral obligation that must be met if self-study is to impact in more than peripheral ways, the academic conversation and scholarship of teaching and teacher education. (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2004, pp. 340-341)

The notion of private theory is interesting when considering the nature of self-study, especially so when also linked to that of scholarship. As Bullough (1997) has previously explained, storytelling is one way of "getting a handle on what we believe, on the models, metaphors and images that underpin action and enable meaning

making . . . through story telling, personal theories become explicit" (p. 19). However, as Bullough and Pinnegar noted (2004), although learning to make personal understandings of practice explicit is important in shaping practice, there is also a need to resist the temptation to privilege such knowledge that can inadvertently lead to romanticizing or justifying existing practice. The point being that in researching practice through self-study, there is a need to demonstrate scholarship by making clear that personal theories are challenged in ways that help the researcher (and the audience) see beyond the personal alone. Scholarship might then be clear in how the researcher demonstrates a concern for rigorous data gathering and analysis, transparency in methods, and an ability to develop knowledge that extends beyond the individual and into the teacher education community more generally. In so doing, scholarship implies a need to ensure that learning through self-study is not simply a pseudonym for *rationalization* or *self-justification* and is an issue for self-study that has long been to the forefront for members of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Much work has gone into mapping the terrain of self-study and exploring these issues (Hamilton, 1998; Kosnick, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2006; Loughran & Russell, 2002); however, there is a big difference between identifying with the ideals of self-study and conducting a scholarly self-study.

It may well be that, like some other fields of endeavor in teaching and teacher education (e.g., reflective practice, action research, narrative inquiry), the sense of familiarity with the label itself as a consequence of the language used to name the field may lead some to applying the label without seriously exploring what undergirds the label. Therefore, in some cases, the allure of the concept of self-study may inadvertently militate against a pursuit of scholarship, not through any overt form of pretense or intentional deception, but rather because the term itself invites interpretations that unwittingly favor private over public theory. This is not to dismiss one in favor of the other, rather to highlight the importance of a

need for appropriate balance to maintain a focus on the value of learning outcomes that might affect teaching and teacher education beyond the individual alone (another important illustration of scholarship). And, to do that requires a commitment to research practices that, regardless of methodology, are important for offering up credible evidence in support of the conclusions being posited.

WHY SELF-STUDY?

Teacher educators engaging in self-study commonly share a broad motivation to improve the experience of teacher education through improving their teaching practice. Whitehead (1998) articulated this motivation to improve practice as a series of questions: "How do I improve my practice?" "How do I live my values more fully in my practice?" and "How do I help my students improve the quality of their learning?" Teacher educators who choose to study their practice also draw on the idea of credibility as a motivating influence in their work. They ask themselves, "How can I be credible to those learning to teach if I do not practice what I advocate for them?" (Berry, 2004c, p. 1308)

Berry (2004c) went on to outline four major reasons (from an extensive analysis of the literature) that motivate teacher educators to embark on self-study. These include (a) articulating a philosophy of practice and checking consistency between practice and beliefs, (b) investigating a particular aspect of practice, (c) developing a model of critical reflection, and (d) generating more meaningful alternatives to institutional evaluation. These four points are not meant to be the only reasons for embarking on self-study, rather they are a grouping of some of the documented ways in self-study. However, they do offer a snapshot of a range of initiators that, at a superficial glance, can appear to be centered so much on the self that the need for external input (data checking, questioning frames and interpretations, etc.) might not be immediately apparent to the casual observer. Unfortunately, it is through this type of cursory glance, or assumed understanding, that those not so familiar with self-study may interpret this type of work—positively and negatively. Thus, on one hand, for some, a sense of excitement in the possibilities of self-study may be created, whereas,

on the other, questioning the very purpose and nature of self-study may arise through a view that such work must be of limited value to others, or that it is "just another story." In either case it is important to see beyond the limitations of these initial responses to fully apprehend what is possible through engaging in quality self-study research.

In an analysis of the publications of a self-study scholar, Hamilton (2005) examined the work of Jeff Northfield over a 10-year period and eloquently described why self-study matters when considering "ways in" at a level beyond those noted by Berry (2004c). What Hamilton did was to see beyond the individual initiators of self-study and describe the philosophical roots through which these more specific initiators are more commonly described. So although different aspects of Northfield's work certainly illustrated (through individual publications) all of the foci Berry described, as a portfolio of study, Hamilton could see a cohering theme that drove Northfield's work beyond those initiators alone:

He recognized the power of the teacher to theorize and the strength of the researchers who understand teaching. Northfield's commitment to teachers and researchers illuminated his queries into teaching and his desire to take these issues into the public arena. . . . [His] work addressed the relationship between current theory regarding teaching and the action of practice. . . . Over the course of his career, Northfield re-examined the development of professional knowledge in the learning-to-teach process for the purpose of generating growth and potential change in teachers' practice. (pp. 86-90)

Therefore, although instances of being "a living contradiction" (Whitehead, 1993) may well be at the heart of beginning a self-study, it is this overarching desire to better align theory and practice, to be more fully informed about the nature of a knowledge of practice, and to explore and build on these "learnings" in public ways that appears to be an underlying common purpose in self-study—a tacit catalyst for self-study. This distinction between the specific initiator and a more general purpose for self-study is clearly evident in the work of many self-study researchers (see, e.g., Dinkelman, 1999; Freese, 1999; Hoban, 1997; Nicol, 2006; Schuck, 1999; Segal, 1999; Tidwell,

2002). What these accounts offer are strong examples of how valuable it can be to find an appropriate balance in reporting between the specific and the general and how, in so doing, the significance of the work becomes much more evident.

When considering what has been described as Northfield's intentions for self-study, the value of recognizing and responding to the "relationship between current theory regarding teaching and the action of practice" (Hamilton, 2005, p. 86) stands out as an important feature of self-study that, in many ways, is best able to be understood when being studied and reported from a practitioner's perspective. Purpose then needs to be clear and obvious in any self-study report. When done well, it can help to address concerns inherent in the alternative perspectives of those excited by, and those dubious about, self-study. In so doing, the question arises: "What does it really mean to do self-study?" Therefore, carefully considering methodology is an important issue in better understanding the nature of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices.

SELF-STUDY METHODOLOGY

Pinnegar (1998) highlighted the fact that self-study is a methodology for studying professional practice and that there is no one way, or correct way, of doing self-study. Rather, how a self-study might be "done" depends on what is sought to be better understood. Therefore, in considering how to approach doing self-study it is important to be cognizant of the continual interplay between research and practice within the practice setting (i.e., as the research unfolds so the learning through the research influences practice and, because the practitioner is the researcher, practice inevitably changes through this feedback, thus influencing what is being researched). The manner in which this complementarity between research and practice is played out is an important aspect of self-study research as it offers insights into how the focus of the self-study may become refined and therefore affect views and expectations about the type of data to be collected and the way in which datasets may need to change—or be augmented—through the research process.

LaBoskey (2004) outlined in detail what she regards as the "many reasons, epistemological, pedagogical, and moral/ethical/political for the methodology of self-study" (p. 821). However, central to these arguments is the recognition that self-study, by its very nature, "defines validity as a validation process based in trustworthiness [as per Mishler, (1990)]" (p. 817). Across the many and varied debates about self-studies of teaching and teacher education practices this issue of trustworthiness is crucial as it is central to creating a platform from which data sets, learnings, and conclusions might be critiqued and questioned to establish the significance and legitimacy of the outcomes being claimed. If sufficient attention is not paid to trustworthiness in self-study, then regardless of the outcomes for the individual, the value of the work for the community of teacher educators as a whole is more likely to be brought into question.

In some cases, when self-study is brought into question it is related to what LaBoskey (2004) described as the political aspect of self-study that is enmeshed in issues of methodology. One component of the political is self-study's ability to give more voice

to the professionals engaged in the practice of teaching in both higher education and the K-12 schools . . . [and this matters because] those who are supposed to have, acquire, and employ the knowledge of teaching are quite capable of identifying, generating, understanding, theorizing, and communicating it. (p. 859)

However, this political edge is not meant to suggest that in creating opportunities for these voices to be heard, that expectations of rigor in method and analysis need to somehow be diminished to create a different space for these voices to be heard. In fact, just as "more traditional research paradigms have developed means to minimize though not eliminate" (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 859) problems of bias, limited perspective, and subjectivity of investigators, so too has self-study. LaBoskey (2004) explained this through four methodological features of self-study that include the

- requirement of evidence of reframing and transformation of practice

- need for interactions with colleagues, students, educational literature (and the researcher's previous work) to continually question developing understandings in order to "interrogate assumptions and values"
- competent use of multiple methods to provide "opportunities to gain different, and thus more comprehensive, perspectives on the educational processes under investigation" (p. 860)
- demand that self-study work is formalized so that it is available to the "professional community for deliberation, further testing and judgment" (p. 860).

Therefore, in considering self-study as a methodology, it is clear that there are important features central to the work that need to be clear in any self-study report. Just as is the case in reporting on research generally, one obvious aspect of quality is the way in which the methods are available for scrutiny and critique. Self-study certainly has established methodological expectations that, when carefully and appropriately applied, illustrate the hallmarks of quality research. However, as noted earlier, using the label *self-study* is not the same as rigorously applying a self-study methodology. The distinction is important.

REPORTING SELF-STUDY

Those who engage in self-study often confront an apparent contradiction, for self-study is not the private and personal affair that the label might suggest. Self-study relies on interaction with close colleagues who can listen actively and constructively. Self-study also relies on ideas and perspectives presented by others and then taken into one's personal teaching and research contexts for exploration of their meanings and consequences. (Russell, 2006, p. 5)

Recognising and documenting problems in practice and engaging in self-study are not necessarily the same thing. As Russell (2006) noted, acting on the problems, issues, or concerns that attract attention in teaching and learning about teaching requires an acceptance of the need to seek alternative perspectives and to seek data that is outside of the self. And, it is in the reporting of self-study that the complexities and interrelationships between research and practice can inadvertently be overlooked or lost. Therefore, paying careful attention to what shapes a self-study is an important factor in reporting on self-study.

Kroll (2005) demonstrated this point well when reporting on her attempt to make inquiry a habit of mind with her student teachers. Her report makes clear the theoretical perspectives that shaped her study, the methodology, context, data sources, and analysis and leaves no doubt that she approached her research in a rigorous and thoughtful manner. More than this, though, the way in which she constructed her report and offered insights into the nature of collaboration and critical friendship influenced how the study was conducted and framed, creates an expectation in the reader of a need to know how the self-study itself affected the participants. In so doing, Kroll captured the essence of the tensions and contradictions of self-study while also demonstrating a scholarship of practice central to the reason for doing the work in the first place.

Kroll's is one example of a self-study that appropriately reflects the research on which the report is based in such a way as to demonstrate findings that go beyond the individual and are valuable to the teacher education community as a whole. In a similar way, self-studies based on other aspects of teaching and teacher education also demonstrate how conducting the research and reporting the research have a synergistic relationship that when appropriately documented and described highlight how self-study shapes practice and research in powerful ways (see, e.g., Dinkelman, Margolis, & Sikkenga, 2006; Kitchen, 2005; Pereira, 2005).

A self-study report, in making clear what the focus is, why it matters, and how it was conducted, also needs to show how "seeing beyond the self" has been developed and implemented because "being personally involved in experiences can limit one's ability to recognize oneself as a living contradiction and therefore impact the self-study" (Loughran, 2004, p. 19). The need to actively pursue understandings from alternative perspectives, or to reframe situations (Schön, 1983), is important in a self-study report to demonstrate that different perspectives on teaching and learning situations have been sought and considered and to (again) minimize possibilities for self-justification or rationalization of existing practices and behaviors.

There are many powerful examples of teacher educators who have actively sought alternative

perspectives based on students' views of a given situation (Berry, 2004a, 2004b; Brandenburg, 2004; Freese, 1999; Hoban, 1997; Nicol, 1997; Russell, 1997; Senese, 2002, 2004; Tidwell, 2002). In all of these cases, the arguments the authors made about their learning through self-study is strengthened by the use of data in which their students' voices highlight alternative views that challenge what, under normal circumstances, might be described as a teacher educator's taken-for-granted assumptions about practice. Hence, these self-study reports make clear the importance of seeking disconfirming data, acting on such data, and reconsidering what might normally be easily overlooked.

One of the most important impacts was to help me re-experience student teaching by seeing the practicum through different eyes. . . . I learned the importance of listening to their [student teachers'] experiences, and the knowledge they bring to the experience. I now see more clearly that an important part of my job as a teacher educator is to enter into dialogue with preservice teachers (Holt-Reynolds, 1994) and work closely with them to help them identify, name, and reframe their personal theories, beliefs and assumptions. . . . [This study] brought to life for me the fact that in the past I have been tempted to view teacher development as a linear process whereby the preservice teacher proceeds from novice to more experienced teacher through the observation-participation and student teaching stages. But I now realize that this linear view ignores or minimizes the unique personal experiences and background knowledge that each student brings to the program. (Freese, 2006, pp. 75-76)

As Freese illustrated, by seeing the practicum from her student-teachers' perspective, what she once took for granted (an approach to thinking about learning to teach that shaped her practice as a teacher educator), was challenged in such a way as to help her reconsider what she did, how, and why. In seeking alternative perspectives on a given situation, by seriously listening to her student-teachers, Freese came to see what was previously hidden. Her assumptions about teaching and learning about teaching became clearer to her in ways that would have been much less likely had she not been involved in a self-study of her teacher education practices. Her claims of her learning about teaching are dramatically

strengthened because of the data she drew on—because she listens to, and learns from, her student teachers. Learning about practice then becomes an issue in considering the nature of self-study and is embedded in the expectation that “what I learn from self-study is indeed useable, applicable, and informing [to my practice as a teacher educator]” (Freese, 2006, p. 75).

LEARNING THROUGH SELF-STUDY

Self-study scholarship in teaching may well be highlighted and made accessible to others by better understanding the underlying knowledge/ideas/theories that influence teachers' pedagogical reasoning so that what is often viewed as exemplary practice is able to be discussed and examined in ways that go beyond the practice itself. . . . [This] is an important step in coming to better understand what really comprises teachers/teacher educators' professional knowledge and in beginning to make that knowledge available to others. (Hamilton, 2004, p. 401)

An important outcome of self-study is embedded in the need to create ways of better understanding what constitutes teachers and/or teacher educators' professional knowledge and, as Hamilton (2004) made clear, one purpose in so doing is not only to better inform the individual involved in the self-study but also to make that knowledge available to others. This, though, is not an easy task for, as has been highlighted throughout the research on teaching literature, much of one's knowledge of practice is tacit, so attempting to define and articulate such knowledge can be a difficult and frustrating process. However, overcoming, rather than succumbing to such difficulties and frustrations is important in demonstrating scholarship in self-study.

Articulating a knowledge of practice may take many forms, and no one form is more important than another for, depending on the study, what is documented and articulated will vary considerably. For example, Ham and Davey (2006) conducted a self-study into online teaching and articulated their learning in terms of the implications for their teaching. At a practical level, the insights they gained influenced their views about what they valued and the way in which those values were reflected in their practice, thus challenging them to better align

their intents and actions. Kosnick and Beck (2006), in working with their ex-students who were at the end of their 2nd year of full-time teaching, were concerned about better understanding their views of their experiences in teacher preparation. In so doing, their findings informed the manner in which they conceptualized their teacher preparation program and how realistic (or otherwise) some aspects of the program were despite their best intentions:

In some areas we will need to be more specific and direct in our teaching, because our previous approach was either too vague or too sophisticated for student teachers. We have also become more aware of the limitations of a preservice program. (p. 257)

As a close read of these studies illustrates, data informs learning in ways that allow the reader to see how the insights gained affect practice, not just thinking about practice.

A way of articulating learning through self-study, different again from the two examples above, is evident in the work of Clarke, Erickson, Collins, and Phelan (2005) through their extensive study into the longevity of the Community and Inquiry in Teacher Education (CITE) program at the University of British Columbia. Using the conceptual frame of complexity science (Davis & Sumara, 2004), their data analysis led them to construct a number of propositions that shaped their understanding of the role and value of cohorts in teacher education:

These propositions draw upon some of the essential features of complexity science. . . . Individually, these propositions are not necessarily new to teacher education, but the ecological emphasis offered by complexity science brings them together in a way that provides far more productive and explanatory power than contexts in which we have encountered them. (p. 171)

Their propositions are:

- allow for improvisation
- seek to articulate what you do not know
- entertain uncertainty
- as we write the text, the text writes us
- value the possibilities of slow schooling
- be alert to cohort knowing.

As their explanations of these propositions illustrate, the strength of their learning about CITE

through self-study stands out because of the way in which they purposefully maintained a big picture view of the program and avoided the easier (and much more common) analytic approach of examining features of the program as separate and distinct components. Thus their analysis reflects the nature of the program itself. In so doing, the purpose of a cohort approach to teacher education is simultaneously played out in their approach to research and analysis because the links between practice and research, so important to the manner in which the program is conducted, are also a major shaping factor in researching the program by using a self-study methodology.

This self-study is itself an implementation of the dynamic, adapting processes of learning systems. It facilitates the self-transformative phenomena . . . our commitment to self-study is an essential aspect of a recursive process of doing, thinking about what was done, making adjustments, and doing again . . . [it also shows] that the field of self-study must continue to strive to provide convincing and rigorous evidence of our claims for improving both the practice of teacher educators and the continuing development of our pre-service teachers as professional educators. (Clarke et al., 2005, p. 175)

CONCLUSION

Zeichner (2005) noted that,

Many teacher educators who conduct research on their own courses and programs argue that they benefit greatly from these inquiries and that this visible commitment to self-inquiry provides a model for their students. They also argue that improvements in their work as teacher educators and their programs result from these self-studies. (p. 750)

There is little doubt that those teacher educators who adopt a self-study methodology for inquiring into their teacher education practices are indeed serious about seeking to better understand the complex nature of teaching and learning about teaching. However, if the outcomes of self-studies are to genuinely affect the work of teacher education beyond the individual, then as has been outlined in this article, there is an ongoing need for such work to demonstrate a scholarship central to research more generally (e.g., to make the work available for public

critique, critical review, and evaluation by members of that community and be such that members of that community begin to use, build on, develop, adapt, adjust, and innovate the work in ways meaningful to their own teaching and learning context).

Quality self-study is evident when it demonstrates (at least) that it is a disciplined and systematic inquiry, values professional learning as a research outcome—for students of teaching and for teacher educators—and aims to develop and better articulate a knowledge of practice. The challenge then for teacher educators interested in self-study is to go beyond the label and to genuinely engage with the methodology. In so doing, learning about practice is more likely to be reality rather than rhetoric in teacher education.

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John Loughran is the Foundation Chair in Curriculum and Professional Practice in the Faculty of Education, Monash University, and associate dean. His research and teaching interests include teacher education, self-study, reflection, teacher research, and professional knowledge of teaching. He was a founding member of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association and continues to be an active member of the SIG. He is the coeditor of Studying Teacher Education: A Journal of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices. Recent books include: Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education: Understanding Teaching and Learning About Teaching (2006), Understanding and Developing Science Teachers Pedagogical Content Knowledge (with A. Berry & P. Mulhall, 2006), and The International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices (with M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. L. Russell, 2004).