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Self-study: a developing research approach for professional learning

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Abstract

In this article the authors consider the 'self-study' research approach that has been used particularly in teacher education contexts in North America and Australia. They explore the concept of self-study and its use as a research approach for practitioners. They identify its limited, but growing use in Europe and focus on developments in the field of teacher education at the University of Hertfordshire, UK.

What is self-study?

The conviction that professionals should be able to improve their practices through systematic research was proposed by Stenhouse in 1975:

'the outstanding characteristics of the extended professional is a capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures' (1975:144).

Since then there has been an increasing interest in practitioner research, and the development of a whole range of inquiry approaches - for example, action research, reflective learning, pragmatic evaluation of practice and lesson study (Boyd & White, 2017). Self-study connects with these approaches but it is characterised by its focus on one's own practice and one's own role in it, and looking more deeply to identify motivations, beliefs, and concerns around an aspect of practice. Characteristics of self-study are: the involvement of critical friends (Schuck & Russell, 2005); the use of theory to help to gain wider perspectives on practice; and methodological rigour (LaBoskey, 2004). Self-study aims not only to enhance the quality of practice, but also to open up the self-study to public debate in the academic community, contributing to the knowledge base of teacher education (Vanassche & Keltchermans, 2015). Interestingly self-study has not been used to the same extent in Europe as it has been in North America or Australia. The name may suggest an inward looking focus on oneself and one's own concerns rather than on the role of the teacher educator, teacher, or other practitioner, in the practice. This understanding of the concept could lead to practitioners discounting this approach when choosing how they will engage in practitioner research.

Why choose self-study?

A reason for choosing self-study as an approach to studying practice relates to the view one takes to the role of the practitioner in the practice. Approaches under a teacher inquiry/self-improvement umbrella can have different areas of focus (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). These include, for example, research in which an aspect of the researcher's practice is

identified, examined, changed and then evaluated. This has the practice itself as the focus. This seems logical if one is aiming to change the way something is undertaken. So, for example, a group of colleagues could explore the way feedback is given on university assignments, collect data from students and colleagues, undertake a change in light of this evidence, perhaps using audio instead of written feedback, and then evaluate this new way of working through further data collection. The findings could then inform feedback given on assignments on this particular programme, with suggestions as to how this could be transferable to other contexts. Critical action research (Carr & Kemis, 2009) may follow a similar research trajectory but have as a focus the growth and emancipation, through the development of critical understanding, of the students or clients who are engaged as participants in, rather than subjects of, the research. Self-study research focuses on the learning of the practitioner-researcher.

Through self-study research the practitioner can develop his/her 'wisdom of practice' (Schulman, 2004) or what van Manen (1991) calls the 'tact of teaching', which is the sensitivity to act in an educative manner in context. Schulman (2004) stresses that the ongoing professional learning of the teacher is essential due to the contextual nature of teaching, where each decision for action has to be made in relation to a wide range of considerations and in a complex context with many learners. Flinn (2018:12) argues that in the development of leadership, - and teaching could be seen as leadership of learning - a complex context necessitates leaders developing their capacities for 'sense-making, reflexivity and practical judgement'. Self-study may be apt for teachers and teacher educators in schools or universities or indeed for other practitioners. The researcher needs to identify what they are seeking to change, and if it is himself or herself as a practitioner then a self-study approach could be appropriate.

Looking at self-studies that have been undertaken, such as those in a collection edited by Russell and Loughran (2007), one sees the challenging nature of this approach, as personal assumptions, judgements and actions are challenged by the self-study researchers themselves and their critical friends. Colleagues who can be both supportive and challenging are central to the practice of self-study. Researchers have their beliefs and actions challenged by these critical friends and may identify that their 'espoused' theories are not their 'theories in action' (Agyris & Schon, 1974), or that their well-intentioned approach may be having a detrimental effect on students. The voice of the student must be heard in self-study and ways of collecting data in contexts of power relations have to be identified. Self-study researchers use published research and writing in the area they are exploring to gain a wider and deeper understanding of that practice, and to look outside the social, cultural and political contexts in which they, their colleagues and their students are set. Self-study researchers must look at practice through Brookfield's (2017) four lenses: self; colleagues; students; and professional literature, in order to develop themselves as practitioners. Self-study is challenging as a research approach because it examines the extent to which one is living out one's values. It also requires one to re-examine them, and as Russell (2007) notes in a personal reflection on his own enquiries, values can evolve in response to examined practice. Of the process of self-study he reports, 'Only by significant effort over several years am I able to fully understand the potential benefits and personal consequences of a change recommended by research, and only through self-study am I able to achieve that understanding' (Russell, 2007: 182). While a piece of self-study research with a particular focus may be time-bounded, the process can lead to the researcher taking an 'inquiry stance' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to practice and professional learning throughout their career.

An example of a teacher who took an inquiry stance to his work in classrooms and later to his teacher educator practice is Bullock (2007). He tried different classroom pedagogies and undertook action research on whether they facilitated student learning. He also looked at himself as a teacher, and later as a teacher educator, working at surfacing his 'default' assumptions and practices so that he could act more knowingly. He found a critical friend invaluable in raising questions and challenging ways of thinking and practising. His interest in self-study grew from his use of Schön's work on reflective practice and epistemology of professional knowledge. He wrote reflections after teaching sessions and used these to identify issues for his practice. For example at one point he noticed that many of his teacher education students had assumptions about teaching that were limiting their pedagogy. This led to the development of a self-study question: 'Do I solicit teacher candidates' prior conceptions about their pedagogy?' (Bullock, 2007:89). In this way he was researching and developing his own professional practice. At the end of his account he writes 'I have much to learn on my journey of thinking about teaching and learning and I am confident that self-study of teacher education practices will help me to articulate my teaching practice and to continue to learn and teach about teaching.' (Bullock, 2007:93)

Self-study research on teacher education – the international and national picture

Over the past 25 years, self-study research has emerged strongly as a form of teacher educator research in North America and Australia. One of the largest special interest groups of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) is the one for self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP). However, self-study research is still limited across Europe (Lunenberg et al., forthcoming). In the UK, this may be because some teacher educators fear that self-study may not be recognised as an acceptable research approach for inclusion in the Research Excellence Framework submission (through which UK universities receive financial reward for contributing to the knowledge base). This may be because some assessors and research leaders may believe that self-study, and other practitioner research, lacks theoretical underpinning, rigour and ability to contribute to the evidence-base for teaching because of the difficulty of generalising from small-scale research.

A report of self-study practices in Iceland, the Netherlands, England and Ireland shows the development of self-study groups and the use of this methodology in an increasing number of doctoral studies (Lunenberg et al., forthcoming). In England there are discreet areas of practice that have arisen through local interest and needs, reflecting the fragmented context of teacher education (Hayler, 2010; Jackson and Burch, 2016; McNamara et al., 2017). The S-STEP SIG of AERA hold a biennial 'Castle Conference' at Herstmonceux Castle in England. Over the 12 years that this conference has been running, there have been only a small number of researchers from English universities presenting each year and in the last 5 years only two academics from English Universities have published in *Studying Teacher Education* (Akinbode, 2013; Vázquez, 2014). Notable in the English scene is the work of Whitehead in developing self-study masters and doctoral groups. Whitehead and Huxtable have consistently contributed to the S-STEP SIG community (e.g. Whitehead and Huxtable, 2008; Whitehead and Huxtable, 2010; Whitehead and Huxtable, 2014; Huxtable and Whitehead, 2016).

The development of self-study at the University of Hertfordshire

In the School of Education, University of Hertfordshire, our interest in self-study was initiated by Helen Burchell who led a reflective practice group of teacher educators. She was interested in using visual and narrative research approaches to inquiry into practice and connected with Jean Clandinin and other leading North Americans and Australian researchers in this field through the AERA. Burchell introduced self-study to the School and was the critical friend to Joy Jarvis who undertook a self-study into her teaching of students in the field of special educational needs presented at the Castle Conference 2006 (Jarvis and Burchell, 2006). Jarvis and Burchell returned from the conference enthusing about John Loughran's book *Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education* (2006) and subsequently the Head of the School purchased a copy for each member of staff in the School. Lunchtime discussions of the book were led by Jarvis and were the inspiration for some small practice-based inquiries. Russell and Loughran's book *Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education. Values, relationships and practices* (2007) was also used to inspire groups of staff in thinking about their own practice.

In 2008, Burchell and Mary Rees attended the Castle Conference and at the following Castle Conference Leo Chivers presented the results of a self-study group of six novice academics in the School of Education through their induction year (Chivers et al., 2010). This study and the process of preparing a conference paper supported the development of academic identity in these colleagues. Liz White, joining the group later, also undertook a self-study which helped her to develop her identity as a teacher educator (White, 2011). In this study a critical incident in practice provoked research involving listening to the voice of the learners to develop a pedagogy of explicit modelling as a teacher educator. Alongside this, Jack Whitehead was invited to speak at the University of Hertfordshire. This raised the standing of self-study, in professional learning and development, with colleagues and doctoral students. Additionally, Adenike Akinbode (2013) undertook her doctorate externally using a reflective approach to personal inquiry and a study group to support criticality. Ann Jasman (2010) while at the University of Hertfordshire explored her own learning as a teacher educator through undertaking research projects with teachers.

We had not connected our work together and labelled it as self-study, rather we had seen ourselves working within the Stenhouse framework (and this of course includes teachers studying themselves) but we had not forefronted the term. Then, in 2017, White was invited by Mieke Lunenberg to present a self-study in a symposium at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER). The symposium was entitled 'Self-Study Methodology: An Inspiring and Ambitious Approach for Practitioner Research in Europe'. This led to an invitation to White and Jarvis to contribute to a chapter of self-study practices in Europe, in the forthcoming new edition of the *International Handbook of Self-study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices* (Lunenberg et al., forthcoming).

In 2018, White invited Eline Vanassche to speak in the School of Education. She shared her experience of S-STEP as an outsider looking in, from her perspective as a researcher. She left us with her lessons on 'teaching' self-study to those new in the field drawn from her involvement in a two-year study of a self-study research group of six experienced teacher educators from Flemish teacher education programmes (Vanassche and Keltchermans, 2016).

What next?

Having identified our story of the development of self-study in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire, we would like to build on these foundations and to move the narrative forward. As 'self-study has the potential to critique the rather narrow and instrumentalist view of teacher education practice and scholarship furthered by policies in many countries' (Vanassche, 2018), we are considering whether the time is ripe for a new self-study group to support the induction and professional development of teacher educators across the university and regional partnerships. Teachers in schools, colleges and universities to learn and develop as practitioners could also use this approach.

Self-study research has the potential to benefit the learning of professionals from a range of disciplines who are teaching in higher education. There is also capacity to explore different ways of conducting self-study research in collaboration with our international colleagues.

[Read 'Learning, in, through and about movement...'](#)

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