

Chapter 16

The Fragile Strengths of Self-Study: Making Bold Claims and Clear Connections

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INTRODUCTION

Few would question that self-study has come into its own; it is well established as a viable field of educational research. Not only is there a substantive body of literature accumulated over more than a decade and summarized in a two-volume international handbook (Loughran et al., 2004) but the work is also continuing in a newly established journal on the topic, in the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, and elsewhere. The strengths of the methodology of self-study and its potential contributions to our understanding of learning to teach are apparent to many, including folks who have not to date considered themselves direct participants. For those of us who have been involved from the outset, we feel some relief that we can spend more of our time just doing the work, instead of expending great effort on defining the field or defending its existence.

But there is some danger in this orientation – danger of resting too much on our laurels and taking too much for granted. In the process of “just doing the work” we run the risk of letting the strengths of the field slip away, especially if we fail to draw and build upon them in concrete and explicit ways. It is in this light that I would like to consider the five chapters in Part III. All of them, as intended, have added to our knowledge of the processes of self-study and its role in the enhancement of teacher education, as I will highlight and summarize below. In the process of doing so, I will argue that all the authors could be bolder about the claims they are making and more explicit about the connections of their work to previous self-study formulations; I will also make some suggestions as to how they and others might go about doing so.

ASSERTING THE CLAIMS

My presumption is that I was invited by the editors of this book to write the summary chapter for this part because of my previous work in the self-study international handbook, for which I served as editor of the section on methodology. In addition to monitoring the completion of the other chapters, most having to do with a particular method type utilized in self-study research, I had to write the introductory chapter that articulated the current nature of the more general self-study methodology, based upon a review of the literature in the field to that point (LaBoskey, 2004a). I also wrote the concluding chapter to that part, which drew upon the whole to make suggestions for the future development of the field (LaBoskey, 2004b).

In those chapters I argued that self-study is a viable and distinct methodology well grounded in particular *epistemological, pedagogical, and moral/ethical/political* theory. Agreeing with Pinnegar (1998), I defined self-study as “a methodology for studying professional practice settings” (p. 33). I then distilled and articulated five predominant characteristics of that research methodology:

- (1) It is *initiated by, and focused on, us* as teachers and teacher educators.
- (2) The research is *improvement-aimed*.
- (3) Self-study is *interactive* at one or more stages of the process.
- (4) The methods of self-study are *multiple and primarily qualitative*.
- (5) Validation in the field is accomplished through *the construction, testing, sharing, and re-testing of exemplars* of teaching practice.

I claimed further that, as a result of these theoretical underpinnings, *the pedagogies, research methods, and research representations* utilized in self-study take particular forms.

None of these features, qualities, or justifications was self-generated; all were derived from a systematic analysis of the self-study literature with the intention of detecting and articulating the consistencies therein. As such, they represent the current agreements in the field – the foundation upon which we should build. We can do so in a number of ways: we might, for instance, add to, extend, transform, or even challenge one or more of those conceptualizations or claims. In this section I will do just that by situating the work of each of the authors within these formulations in order to further explicate the contributions I think each is making to the processes of self-study in teaching and teacher education.

Groundwater-Smith

One of the primary contributions of Susan Groundwater-Smith’s chapter is to the first characteristic of the methodology of self-study, *the focus on the self*.

In utilizing the term “our second record”, which includes the views, values, interpretations, and assumptions that result from our personal histories, she adds detail to our definition of the self. That is, she articulates particular aspects of our identity that need to be surfaced, analysed, accounted for, and, if necessary, transformed, if our research is to help us learn about ourselves and enhance our professional identity formation, a central goal of Groundwater-Smith’s and of self-study research. Furthermore, she extends the notion beyond the domain of self-study by supporting an argument made previously by Lawrence Stenhouse and others that all researchers need to make their personal interests and values transparent. In other words, she argues for the application of this feature of self-study methodology to every type of research design.

Since Groundwater-Smith examines and interrogates the influence of her second record in the context of her role as the facilitator of the practitioner inquiry of others, she also provides insight into the *interactive* quality of self-study methodology, the third characteristic. Her investigation makes apparent how important it is to experience our perspectives in relationship to those of others, especially others very different from us, if we are to detect the details of that second record, challenge the necessarily circumscribed and often problematic beliefs that reside there, and ultimately transform them.

One of the techniques Groundwater-Smith used in her research for the purpose of making “the tacit more explicit, more tangible and more contestable” was a device she acquired from a local radio talk show she referred to as “two books and a person”. What that entailed in her case was the naming of two books and one person who had been particularly influential in her understanding of her professional self, including the reasons for those choices. By supplying us with an exemplar of how this strategy worked for her, she is adding to our existing repertoire of possible and compatible *research methods*.

Aubusson and Gregson

One of the main ways in which the chapter by Peter Aubusson and Robyn Gregson strengthens self-study is by providing us, somewhat indirectly, with an instantiation of how the methodology of self-study is, and needs to be, consistent with its *theoretical underpinnings*. Indeed I would suggest that the employment of self-study in a context where some of the institutional conceptions of the teaching/learning process were different from the pedagogical and epistemological theories behind self-study was at least partially responsible for the difficulties they encountered. At one point, for instance, they describe these challenges as a “clash between researcher and teacher roles”, which is true because of the way in which those roles have been defined traditionally, and in Gregson’s situation. The beauty of their story is that it provides us with

clues as to how that discrepancy might be resolved – through a redefinition of both roles according to the theoretical foundations of self-study. This would make the use of self-study action research less challenging, precisely because in this methodology the distinction between the roles is virtually eliminated. If Gregson’s context defined teaching and learning as self-study researchers do, she would be provided with time and support to, among other things, articulate and rearticulate her aims; to gather, examine, and debate evidence of learning in ways that would not require teaching and learning to be put on hold in the meantime; and work with colleagues who could not possibly conceive of such endeavors as oppositional to, or different from, “just doing their jobs”. The claim I think their research is making is that taking an inquiry orientation to our practice, as self-study does, *is* our job. The processes of self-study require that the roles of teacher and researcher be integrated or, stated in the reverse, teaching in ways consistent with theories related to the social construction of knowledge will support the doing of self-study.

If such a shift were to happen, both teachers and teacher educators would always be using student outcomes, as determined by a systematic analysis of student work and performance, to inform their practice. The deliberations over what constitutes “evidence” in self-study action research, as exemplified in the Aubusson/Gregson chapter, contribute to both the *pedagogy* of self-study, which includes modes of assessment, and the *validation* aspect of our research methodology, the fifth characteristic. In particular, they make clear that our search for evidence of learning needs to be guided by an explicit, yet qualified, identification of our aims – what we are intending to accomplish. In addition, the pursuit needs to be ongoing and never dependent on a singular representation or interpretation of understanding.

This careful analysis of their research process is representative of one of the chapter’s greatest strengths: they are particularly explicit in their efforts to connect their work with previous formulations. They conceptualize their investigation, for instance, in relation to the handbook chapter on the *method* of action research (Feldman et al., 2004) in a manner that both extends that discussion and raises important questions about it. Furthermore, they utilize the *characteristics of self-study methodology* from my chapter to determine whether or not their research could be deemed self-study. This is exactly the kind of process I am encouraging herein. In a later section of this chapter I will speak about how I think this aspect of their work might be further enhanced.

Schuck

Like Aubusson and Gregson, Sandy Schuck’s chapter examines the challenges that result when there is a discrepancy between our instructional and

empirical practice and the *epistemological and pedagogical theories* held by our institutions, our colleagues, our students, and us. In her case she takes this issue on directly and makes it the focus of her self-study research. In fact, she suggests that a growing awareness of, and dissatisfaction with, the outcomes of her teaching with regard to student understanding and performance triggered her move into self-study, an approach that enabled her to better specify the nature of the inconsistencies between her practice and her goals, differences that were not evident in her previous means of assessment, including institutional course evaluations. In addition, self-study provided her with a means for bringing those two aspects of her work more into alignment.

In the process of doing this research, Schuck explicated a set of guiding questions that both resonate with, and amplify, the questions that have been previously identified as central to self-study: “How do I live my values more fully in my practice?” (Loughran, 2002) and “How do I improve my practice?” (Whitehead, 2000). Schuck’s questions are these: “How do I know if I am doing a good job in my teaching? What counts as evidence for this? What am I actually trying to achieve in my teaching?” The greater specificity of these questions might grant the field more direction with regard to both our *research designs* and *pedagogical strategies* than do the foundational questions posed by Loughran and Whitehead. At least her questions make very explicit the need for us to focus from the outset on the related aspects of aim clarification and data-gathering strategies that will provide evidence regarding those aims, and therefore should, as Aubusson and Gregson have already noted, strengthen the process. Because her questions remind us of our concern for the value of our work and its potential to make a meaningful difference in the lives of our students, she is also making a contribution to our consideration of the *moral/ethical/political* qualities of self-study, a reminder I believe we could use more often.

Most noteworthy in Schuck’s chapter is the fact that it is not the documentation of a single study. Rather it is a summary and analysis of a process that has taken place over time. As such, it represents what I would call “a body of work” (LaBoskey, 2004b) and is, therefore, an exemplar of the *validation process* described in the fifth characteristic of the methodology of self-study. I have argued that the field is, and has been, using a means of validation like that described by Mishler (1990), who proposes “to redefine validation as the process(es) through which we make claims for and evaluate the ‘trustworthiness’ of reported observations, interpretations, and generalizations” (p. 419). He suggests that this can only be done in “the general flow of scientific research” rather than by a discrete form of assessment applied to a single study. Therefore, I included in my recommendations to the field the

production of bodies of work that focus on, and illuminate, an individual's accumulated evidence of growth, which will thereby help to validate the knowledge claims thus achieved. Schuck's chapter does just that.

De Vries

The primary focus of Peter de Vries' chapter is on the question of representation in self-study research. He explores in great depth the potential of the autobiographical novel not only to represent teacher experience and knowledge but also to provoke both individual and communal deliberation about, and perhaps reconsideration of, the meanings embodied by such a story. Thus, his grappling with whether or not his novel can be considered research directs our attention to the connection between our *research designs* and our *research representations*. The questions de Vries raises and the struggles in which he engages help to confirm claims made previously by Eisner (1993): "The meaning that representation carries is both constrained and made possible by the form of representation we employ. Not everything can be 'said' with anything" (p. 7). De Vries clarifies both the strengths and limitations of the autobiographical novel in self-study research. He also shows us how the method needs to be engaged in order to maximize the former and minimize the latter.

One of the means advocated by de Vries for enhancing the potential of the autobiographical novel both to reveal and to transform teacher knowledge for the self and the other is through *interaction*, the third feature of the methodology of self-study. In fact, he provides us with an exemplar for how to employ interaction in two different ways and for two different reasons. The first involves the interaction between the author and other participants for the purpose of corroborating and expanding upon the experiences and understandings portrayed in the novel – a relevant type of triangulation, if you will. This is carried out in a manner consistent with the form – via, in de Vries' characterization, a phenomenological approach. The second entails interactions between subsequent readers of the novel and the author and his ideas, for the purpose of extending the conversation in ways that will either confirm or challenge the value of the experiences and interpretations represented in the text to their own identity development.

According to de Vries, this is the ultimate intention of his self-study – to facilitate identity development. He wants to characterize and enhance his identity as a male primary school music teacher and contribute to a similar process for others. Identity development is embraced as a central goal of all self-study research. Bullough (1994) describes it as an "ongoing quest for authenticity" (p. 110). And the authentic self must be inclusive of the whole

self – the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual (Palmer, 1998). Derry (2002) and others have argued that artistic media are unique in their abilities to capture and convey the emotions. De Vries supports this claim by emphasizing the centrality of the emotional aspects of the lived experiences of teachers and making clear that the novel is especially capable of representing the “truth” of those feelings. He thus strengthens the argument that we need to include *multiple, primarily qualitative* means in our self-study research, the fourth feature of the methodology.

Hoban and Brickell

The chapter by Garry Hoban and Gwyn Brickell provides us with an excellent example of the value of having some self-study scholarship focused on a very specific aspect of the work. To be considered within the domain of self-study a treatise does not have to be an actual self-study; nor does it have to contemplate the field as a whole. The authors themselves acknowledge that “this chapter does not represent a self-study”. Instead it is devoted to a very detailed description, supported by specific examples, of a particular reflective tool that could be employed in self-study either as a *pedagogical strategy* or as a *research method* or both. I have argued (LaBoskey, 2004a) that assignments used by teacher educators to facilitate student learning are not the same as self-study because they are typically “lacking in certain requirements of self-study, most particularly in the metacognition involved in theorizing the learning experience and in the formalization of the work” (p. 827). I would stand by that argument in this case; neither the students nor the authors are engaged in self-study. Rather, Hoban and Brickell are sharing with us a specific strategy, diagrams of the teaching and learning process, which could become a part of future self-studies if we utilized them as data sources in our research designs. I think, when this is the aim, authors would do well to follow their example and provide us with as much detail with regard to form, function, and potential outcome as possible.

In addition, self-study researchers who choose this focus need to provide us with a rationale for the tool, which these authors did. One of the main supports offered by them for this method is its consistency with the *epistemological and pedagogical theories* that underlie the self-study field. Hoban and Brickell are engaging their student teachers in this “self-study-like” activity because that is how they believe the process of learning to teach happens. The justifications they provide for the strategy include the need to study teaching and learning as a relationship; reflection as a key procedure for encouraging pre-service teachers to make meaning from their experiences; the quality of that reflection as dependent upon the richness of the

mental representations they have initially formed; and the importance of having pre-service teachers reflect on not only what they are learning but also how they are learning it, all of which are consistent with the theoretical framework for the field of self-study. On those grounds, these authors are making the claim that diagrams of the teaching and learning process should be added to our repertoire of methods we might employ in the pedagogy and research of self-study.

They, like all the authors in Part III, have made contributions to one or more aspects of the processes of self-study in teaching and teacher education. Some have made those claims more explicit than others. One of my suggestions to them and to the rest of us is that we, as John Loughran (2004) has already argued, make our learning from self-study more accessible to others by stating the “assertions” that result from that research clearly and boldly. Only in that way can the ideas be employed, applied, and re-tested by the teacher education community in ways that will help us to embrace, discard, or transform those assertions; this is the essence of the validation process for the field. The other suggestion I have for enhancing this process and fortifying our strengths is by making very explicit what aspect of the work we are making assertions about and how those connect with, extend, or challenge, earlier claims. In the next section I will illustrate what I mean by pointing out a few additional ways in which I think the work of these authors could be better situated within previous formulations.

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

One suggestion I had for the future development of the field was for us to better clarify the distinctions between the terms “method” and “methodology” (LaBoskey, 2004b). In my review of the literature I found the usage and definitions of these terms to be inconsistent in the field, resulting in some confusion. This was the case in many of the chapters in this part. For instance, Aubusson and Gregson agonize over “the interactions among self-study, action research and teacher-research methodologies”. I would propose that if they conceptualized action research as a *method* to be used within the *methodology* of self-study with the teacher-researcher as the self in this case, their dilemma would, in the main, be resolved. Stated otherwise, the five characteristics of the self-study methodology would provide the frame for their research, wherein the teacher-researcher self would be embodied in aspect one and action research would be the main method, as included in aspect three. Making connections, then, with previous discussions of the difference between method and methodology in self-study could help to strengthen their research and, simultaneously, the field.

Similarly, the authors in Part III, as well as other self-study scholars, would do well to be sure that the pedagogical strategies and research methods we use are consistent with the epistemological and pedagogical theoretical underpinnings of the field. In addition, we need to make those conceptual frameworks very explicit in our writings and presentations. Schuck's chapter is commendable in this regard, but I would suggest she could take the effort even further, particularly in her discussion of the implications of her work for herself and others. Very specifically, I believe that she should characterize her future endeavours as not just changing people's conceptions about self-study but also transforming their beliefs about the nature of the teaching/learning process. If she made that connection more explicit to herself, as well as to others, it may open to her other avenues for pursuing her goal of transforming her teaching and the subsequent teaching of her graduates.

As I mentioned earlier, de Vries struggled with the notion of validation in his research utilizing the autobiographical novel for similar reasons. His shift to the self-study methodological paradigm was not as complete as it might have been. That is, he drew upon the notion of collaboration, the third characteristic, to try to establish validity. He consulted with "characters from his teaching past" to see whether or not they remembered things as he did and in that way better establish the "truth" of his story. He does recognize the inadequacies of this practice and alludes to its possible irrelevancy, but is somewhat at a loss as to what to do about it. I propose that if he took it a step further and also connected with the fifth characteristic, he would be engaging in a validation process more consistent with the field of self-study and more satisfying to him. He would assume and acknowledge without reticence that validity within a single study, in his case a single autobiographical novel, is and must always be partial, and simply stress the need for further validation to be accomplished through the testing of his exemplar in the future lives and self-studies of other male primary school music teachers, rather than by changing what he has already done.

Hoban and Brickell do draw upon the theoretical groundings of the self-study realm in their efforts to promote the utilization of diagrams of the teaching and learning process in self-study as a pedagogical strategy and data-gathering method. It is a different aspect of their work that I think needs to be more directly connected with previous formulations. They acknowledge that they are not reporting on their own self-study; however, they do suggest that they are engaging their student teachers in self-study. As previously mentioned, I (LaBoskey, 2004a) and others have made the claim that assignments we give to student teachers for the purpose of promoting reflection are not the same as self-study. Hoban and Brickell can, of course,

believe otherwise, but if so, they need to use the definitions of self-study to justify that position in direct and explicit contrast to the previous arguments. Advancing the field through connections with the past does not mean we always have to agree with what has come before; it does mean we have to explain how and why we are proposing the changes we are.

Many in self-study have argued that to be deemed self-study there must be a demonstrated transformation in the self-study researcher; this aspect must be part of the improvement aimed for and achieved, the second feature of the methodology. Hoban and Brickell are not presenting a self-study so that concern is not applicable in their case. Schuck's chapter constitutes a body of work rather than an individual study, whose whole purpose is to document that transformation, so the question is also inappropriate in this instance. I think the three other chapters could strengthen their contribution to the processes of self-study if they made more explicit the nature of the personal transformations they made – exactly how they know, think, feel, and act differently as a result of their research. For example, Groundwater-Smith documents very courageously the limitations she discovered in her assumptions about the school context in which she was working. In addition, she proposes several compelling questions derived from those discoveries that she believes would facilitate the ongoing development of the professional identities of any of us involved in the facilitation of teacher inquiry and learning. What she does not do is summarize or explain the particular transformations she made in her professional identity as a result of this project. More complete connections with the previous literature in self-study would direct her to do so, would remind her that the notation of self-change would constitute particularly powerful grounding for her arguments. In other words, she, like the other authors in this part, should make the assertions about what has been learned more explicit, which brings me back to the suggestion made in the first portion of this chapter.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The authors of this part have all made valuable contributions to the general processes of self-study in teaching and teacher education, though the nature of those contributions vary in terms of both focus and means. In this chapter I have tried to highlight what I consider to be the most important, as well as suggest ways to extend and solidify what they have done. In an effort to practice what I preach and be consistent with the validation process I believe we should be pursuing, I would remind both the authors and the readers that the analysis of their findings and proposals might be incomplete. It is up to all of us to take the next steps, to continue the validation process by embracing

those ideas we find most “trustworthy” and test them out for ourselves. I think we will all find much in these pieces to be worth the risk. Then when we document, analyse, and share the results of these new self-studies, we need to situate them in the context of this text. We cannot preserve the fragile strengths and advance the field of self-study simply by doing the work; we must also make bold claims or assertions (Loughran, 2004) about the discoveries that result and make clear how the knowledge we have generated connects to previous formulations – what aspect of the field it helps to illuminate and in what way.

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