Doing Self-Study: The Art of Turning Inquiry on Yourself

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Introduction

This book is about the possible relevancies of self-study to physical education. In the past three decades, self-study has emerged as a considered, reflexive way of researching teaching and teacher education practices. It is not a form of doing research that seeks to simplify or reduce teaching to its core constituent elements, nor does it position teaching as a process capable of being understood from the outside by neutral and detached observers. Rather, self-study brings sensitivity to the importance of the embodied individual-in-action and positions teaching as a practice that is 'simultaneously the thing we know about, the thing we do and the thing we research' (Ham and Kane 2004, p. 104). It is a research practice defined more by its focus of study rather than by its methods for conducting inquiry (Loughran 2004) and offers potential for ways of understanding that embrace uncertainty, non-linearity, and the inevitable 'messiness' that is inherent in pedagogical settings. However, exploring its relevancy for physical education is far from straightforward. Indeed, it is not clear if self-study should be labeled a community of practice, a research methodology, or a particular attitude towards doing research. Nonetheless, self-study has captured the interests of many researchers whose studies seek to develop a critically reflective approach to understanding teaching practice grounded in the everyday practicalities of their own unique situations.

As an educational practice, physical education increasingly finds itself challenged by 'new times' (Kirk 2009; Tinning 2010). For both teachers and teacher educators, these new times can be characterised as being highly complex, infused with multiple constraints, and constituted by participants who are diversely interconnected. These

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characteristics can be observed in the increasing uses of technology, increased focus on graduate standards, multiple educational imperatives (including competing health and sporting outcomes), new expectations for the nature of teachers' work in schools, reductions to funding, facilities and support, and a changing culture towards more personalised, self-paced, and school-situated approaches to learning (Kirk 2009; Ovens et al. 2013). Individually and collectively, each of these characteristics challenges traditional models of teaching and learning. What emerges from such challenges is an increasing need for teachers and teacher educators to ensure that practice continues to adapt, evolve, and be coherent with the principles that characterise quality in each setting. In other words, there is both a need and a niche for examples of how practitioners can research the situational and complex nature of what they do and explore the interplay between scholarship and practice.

Our aim in this book is to promote discussion and reflection by engaging scholars already employing self-study in their work with others who can reflect upon and critique its potential use in the field of physical education. The book explores self-study as the interplay of scholarship and practice in teaching and teacher education, and considers its value in highlighting the emerging conflicts, dilemmas, and incongruities arising within the pedagogies for contemporary practice. Each of the following chapters help illuminate the diversity in how physical education scholars view and use self-study to carry out and inform their scholarship and practice, to-ing and fro-ing between changes, impacts, and implications for self, practice, students, and programs. This involves communicating newly gained understanding with others in the teaching and teacher education communities, and enacting these new and improved understandings of self, practice, and learning in the classes they teach.

In this initial chapter we provide an overview of what we mean by self-study, outlining the essential features that characterise this way of doing research. We then consider how self-study opens a potentially rich space for physical education by exploring how the methodology of self-study involves examining the concepts of practice and self. This discussion then enables consideration of the key features of how to undertake self-study before we conclude with a suggestion that self-study is a highly reflexive form of inquiry. Concluding in this way serves to remind readers of the difficulties of doing research on messy subjects like teaching. Overall, our aim is to provide an introduction to self-study for the non-specialist audience and, at the same time, to form the foundation from which the following chapters and future research and practice may build.

What Is Self-Study?

Schulte (2009) suggests that self-study research is difficult to define because it neither prescribes a particular method nor does it promote a particular goal. Zeichner and Noffke (2001) avoided defining self-study, preferring instead to describe it as using 'various qualitative methods' to focus practitioner inquiry on a 'wide range of substantive issues' (p. 305). Cole and Knowles (1998) do slightly better in suggesting that self-study is 'qualitative research focused inward' (p. 229), while

Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) argue it is postmodern in perspective since self-study scholars attempt to embrace uncertainty and challenge what counts as research, knowing, and knowledge. This lack of lack of clarity stems, in part, from the variety of qualitative traditions that self-study researchers draw from. Much like bricoleurs described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), those engaging in self-study often employ methods from different disciplinary fields such as narrative inquiry, action research, discourse analysis, and interpretive phenomenology. It is also due to the fact that 'Self-study' is a colloquial abbreviation used among colleagues and that 'Self-study of Practice' or 'Self-study of Teacher Education Practices' may be better representations of what these researchers do.

While definitions may be difficult, it is important to acknowledge that those who label their work as self-study share a common set of characteristics that enable their research to be identified as such. While the methodological features of these characteristics will be explored in more depth later in this chapter, we begin by focusing on three features in particular to help frame the broad nature of self-study research.

A Community

Firstly, self-study is a wide-ranging professional network of practitioners who share, research, and evolve their own practice as teachers and teacher educators. According to Loughran (2004), the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) network emerged in the early 1990s as teacher educators began discussing the challenges they experienced as teacher educators involved in teaching about teaching. As Pithouse et al. (2009) point out, 'what brought researchers together was a shared but tacit acknowledgement that because teaching is messy, complicated, contextualized – hard to pin down, we need to be innovative and creative in the search for more suitable ways to understand and improve our practice as teachers and teacher educators' (p. 46). Since finding common threads between their work, the S-STEP network has grown to be a highly active community as one of the largest special interest groups (SIGs) within the American Educational Research Association (AERA). The community also launched its own biennial 'Castle' Conference in 1996 and this has enjoyed growing attendance and support each time it is held (Young et al. 2012).

This professional network has been essential in evolving the self-study concept and for supporting its various practitioners. As Zeichner (1999) noted, 'the self-study in teacher education movement … has been probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research' (p. 8). The evolution of self-study is reflected in its increasingly widespread exposure and reporting, with examples of self-study research (whether empirical or conceptual) now seen in publications that: (a) reach audiences who are specifically interested in self-study (such as *Studying Teacher Education* or the Springer Series of which this book is a part), (b) reach audiences in the broader educational research community (such as *Educational Researcher*) or (c) might be viewed by some as holding 'traditional' or rather conservative views of what counts as research. Clearly, the value and utility

of self-study research is being recognized as a powerful tool to help improve our understanding of the processes of learning to teach, and the problematic nature of teaching about teaching (Borko et al. 2007).

Stance

Secondly, self-study represents an inquiry-oriented stance towards researching one's own practice. A main aim of self-study for teachers and teacher educators is to conduct systematic research of the self-in-practice in order to consider and articulate the complexities and challenges of teaching and learning to teach (Loughran 2004). As Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) explain, self-study is, 'the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas … It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political … it draws on one's life, but it is more than that. Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known and ideas considered' (p. 236). Conceptualised in this way, self-study is less about prescriptive methods for generating sets of data and more about the insights and questioning that researchers bring to making sense of the empirical material emerging from their inquiry. Positioned simultaneously as the subject and object of research, Kelchtermans and Hamilton (2004) note that the researcher can bring, '… an interpretative, interactionist and contextualised view. Only from an in-depth analysis of the meaningful specificities of the local context, can we expect to develop insights that have relevance beyond that situation' (p. 786).

In this sense, self-study draws from similar philosophical and epistemological commitments as other forms of practitioner inquiry, such as action research, reflective practice, autoethnography, life-history, visual and narrative inquiry (Mitchell and Weber 2005; Pithouse et al. 2009). This can lead to confusion about how self-study differs from these other forms of inquiry. While there are similarities, the essential differences relate to how each form of inquiry deals with core tensions created by situating inquiry within the practitioner's context of practice. For example, in clarifying the differences between action research and self-study, Samaras and Freese (2009) explain that 'action research is more about what the teacher does, and not so much about who the teacher is' (p. 5). What stands self-study apart from other forms of practitioner inquiry is the simultaneous focus on understanding *self* as it enacts *practice* (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001). Self-study researchers therefore investigate themselves with the intent to improve personally and professionally (Samaras and Freese 2006).

Desire

Thirdly, self-study enacts a disposition of desire. The notion of 'desire' being invoked here is not that of a feeling or emotion but, as Zembylas (2007) argues, 'a *force* influencing the subject's modes of existence' (p. 336). Framed in this way, the

act of turning the critical gaze on the 'self' reflects a desire to *be more*, to *improve*, to *better understand*. As Loughran (2007) notes, desire provides the productive momentum for self-study since, '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' (p. 14). Desire thus renders the complexity of the relational encounter between researcher and researched as a source of transformation. This can potentially be an uncomfortable and disconcerting process for the self-study researcher, especially 'when the "self" we come to see in self-study is not the "self" we think we are, or the "self" we would like to be' (Dadds 1993, p. 287). In this sense, there is duplicity in the desire embodied in self-study: while desire exposes the uncertainties, inconsistencies and risks involved in putting the self-in-practice as the focus of inquiry, it can also bring pleasures when alternative and possibly subversive positions are enabled.

Focusing on the Self-in-Practice

We now turn to focus on how to conceptualise the existential setting and activities in which the self is engaged. We suggest this opens a potentially fertile space for physical education scholarship because of the possibility of rethinking the body, self, knowing, and agency, particularly in relation to engaging in pedagogical work. Contemporary social theory has increasingly brought into question the appropriateness of theorising any social action, like teaching or teacher education, on either the basis of free and independent actions (methodological individualism) or as determined by structures or social wholes (methodological holism) (Schatzki 2001; Rouse 2007). Self-study avoids the extremes of either approach by instead turning towards the concept of *practice*. As a way of conceptualising social order and agency, the concept of practice itself emerges from a history of culturally-oriented social theories sensitive to the way symbolic structures of knowledge are enacted into being as individuals engage with their lived worlds (Reckwitz 2002). Practices can be thought of as culturally bound configurations of activity that individuals perform in doing a particular profession, work role, or craft. In this view, the activities being undertaken by an individual are not performed because they have complete unrestrained agency or are being compliant to normative expectations. Rather, these social activities are embodied in collective and symbolic performances that enable a socially shared way of ascribing meaning to the world (Reckwitz 2002).

In self-study the term practice refers to all the activities someone engages in as part of a particular profession (like teaching), or specialised endeavour (such as sport), including the responsibilities, beliefs, and knowledge that informs and gives meaning to those activities (Pinnegar and Hamilton 2009). The embodied self then becomes a performer of practices. Performances not only embody patterns of bodily

action, but also certain routinised ways of understanding, knowing how, and being from the perspective of a particular discursive community. A practice is thus a routinised way in which bodies are comported, artifacts are created, knowledge is manifested, relationships are identified, and spaces made meaningful places to occupy (Schatzki 2001; Rouse 2007). Importantly, a practice is not a quality of the individual, but is inherently social in that it is a mode of behaving and understanding that appears at different temporal and spatial localities and is performed by different practitioners of that craft, profession, or role (Reckwitz 2002). The productive space here for physical education scholars is that this form of social theory takes the human body to be the nexus where the practices that practitioners perform become embodied as part of the everyday, messy and mundane realities of 'doing' their role (Schatzki 2001; Green 2002).

It may surprise some that we describe teaching as messy and mundane. By messy, we mean that the complexity of teaching ensures an ongoing precarious balance between stability and chaos in each moment of the encounter (Ovens et al. 2013). No two situations, classes, or students are the same. What works in one setting may not work in the next setting. Practices then emerge as ways of managing the diversely interconnected elements in each setting. By mundane, we mean that teaching becomes routine and non-consciously performed (Rossi and Cassidy 1999; Green 2002). While we concede that the teaching act is orientated towards the instrumental, we suggest it is more generative to think about the daily performances of teaching as more unreflexive and habitual. In this sense, the ubiquitous features of our teaching contexts tend to be unreflexively negotiated, our identities enacted without self-consciousness, and regular routines are followed unquestioningly.

At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of what is meant by 'self' in the title 'self-study'. The concept of 'self' can be distracting, particularly since it can imply that in this approach the researcher is simply focused on doing research on themselves informed only by their own perspective. Conceptualisations of selfhood that are limited to the individual's internal point of view can lead to misunderstanding self-study as a confessional story about one's experiences of practice or a criticism that it is simply 'navel gazing'. While not trying to disparage the epistemological value of either narrative inquiry or contemplating one's navel, the purpose of foregrounding 'self' in self-study is a deliberate act to acknowledge that it is the self who is producing knowledge of practice while simultaneously enacting that practice. Relationality is central to framing the self in this way since the actors in any setting are interdependent with both their practice and others who co-participate with them in that practice (Ovens et al. 2013). A focus on relationships shifts attention away from the individual components involved in a practice towards the constitutive nature of how these components are linked in the production of practice (Osberg et al. 2008). Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) assert that having 'self' in the title, '… positions the researcher as a particular kind of inquirer and declares the relationship of that inquirer both to the practice and to others who are engaged with the inquirer in constructing the practice' (p. 12).

Turning Inquiry on the Self-in-Practice

How do we study the self? Is there a way of taking the broad sketch of the terrain outlined above and converting it into a map for 'doing' self-study? There are a number of very good resources that outline the nature of doing self-study, such as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), LaBoskey (2004), Loughran (2007), Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009), and Samaras (2011). In addition, perhaps the most authoritative source of information on self-study is covered in the two-volume *International Handbook of Self-study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices* (Loughran et al. 2004). Given that these publications outline the rich myriad of ways of implementing self-study research, the following description only serves as a brief introduction.

The starting point is typically to acknowledge that in self-study it is the self (embodied and relationally situated) who is responsible for setting the research agenda and acting on the subsequent findings. LaBoskey (2004) states that a characteristic of self-study is that it is self-initiated and self-focused. The teacher or teacher educator initiates the research process, focuses inquiry on the self-in-practice, generates appropriate empirical material for analysis, interacts with different viewpoints (both published and shared personally), and takes responsibility for producing knowledge capable of informing and reframing future practice beyond the self (Loughran 2007). In this way, the process of doing the research is shaped by what the researcher knows in, of, and about practice, and by his or her ability to take up new, contradictory or subversive positions in respect to their practice. In a similar manner, Ham and Kane (2004) suggest that self-study, 'derives not from a passive romantic remembering in tranquility of a single experience, but from the iterative and consciously self-analytical reflection on, repetition of, and gathering data about, the purposeful social actions that are the center of the study' (p. 129).

Framing self-study in this way orients it as a provocative activity undertaken with the express aim of improvement. LaBoskey (2004) notes that this aim has an extensive quality, particularly since self-study researchers 'wish to transform ourselves first so that we might be better situated to help transform our students, their students, and the institutional and social contexts that surround and constrain us' (p. 820–1). However, it is important not to be seduced by the illusion that improvement involves the quest for technical mastery or successful application of theory to practice. There are many layers to practice, and many layers of understanding of the experiences we have as teachers and students. The acts of provoking and being provoked involve the deliberate attempt to *call forth a particular response*. In self-study, being provocative in the interests of improving practice implies calling forth the forms of subjectivity involved in enacting good judgment rather than the reductive focus on refining skills and knowledge. Enacting good judgment generates two forms of knowledge in respect to improved practice: knowledge situated in the inquirer's embodied practices, and conceptual knowledge that can be shared with other practitioners and contributes to the academic field (Loughran 2010).

Another aspect of provoking and being provoked is the necessity of interaction. The study of self-in-practice is never a solitary endeavour since practices are sets of culturally bound activities emerging from the collective actions, culture, and relationships with others also working in the same setting or community of practice. The practice of self-study is always interactive, particularly in the way the researcher sustains a dialogue with others co-participating in the practice, with data sets, with related theoretical and research literature, and with co-researchers and colleagues. Although seemingly counter-intuitive, many self-studies are collaborative (Kitchen et al. 2008). In such moments of collaboration, it is the support of caring and sensitive critical friends that make it easier to remain open to reframing practice and developing professionally. However, support in this sense is more than just collaborating with or alongside others. It implies a sense of openness, honesty, cooperation, debate, and dialogue that is inherent to a collectivity committed to a common cause.

The messy and mundane nature of studying the self-in-practice typically necessitates a careful and systematic approach based on using multiple, primarily qualitative methods of inquiry. As Trumball (2004) notes, 'all of us work to ensure that the data gathered are not mere fictions, even as we acknowledge that our own views will affect how we see the world' (p. 1225). Self-study researchers utilise multiple means for defining, discovering, generating, and articulating the fleeting, complex interactions and musings that characterise pedagogical work. In a real sense, this means that self-study researchers have flexibility when selecting the methods and data sources that will best provide needed evidence for understanding practice. For example, such methods may include combinations of keeping reflective journals, taking field notes, collecting or generating artifacts (such as lesson plans or course outlines), or taking video recordings of teaching performances. While first-person data may typically evoke internal perspectives from the point of view of the practitioner-researcher, such data sources also typically reflect external perspectives represented by the author's perceptions of the perspectives of others (such as peers or students). When a critical friend or friends become/s involved, data may be drawn from recorded conversations, correspondence (such as emails or blog postings), or observations of one another's practice. Like all practitioner inquirers, how teachers and teacher educators come to understand and improve their practice is largely dependent upon reactions, feedback, critique, and responses from students (in tacit and explicit forms). Students' perspectives therefore typically call forth a response from the self-study researcher and serve as a springboard from which to question their assumptions about teaching, further explore their own practice, and share their insights. Student perspectives might be represented by traditional forms of data, gathered through interviews, formal or informal evaluations of teaching, or samples of student work. Self-study thus offers a unique perspective on the processes of learning to teach because students' and teacher educators' experiences of teaching and learning are inextricably linked.

As with all research, care needs to be exercised not only in the way any empirical materials are generated or collected for analysis, but also in the methods used for making sense of this information. There is always a risk that in providing an interpretative, interactionist, and contextualised view the researcher only attends to

the findings that support their beliefs, hopes, and dreams. Therefore, as Trumball (2004) advises, in self-study 'we work to ensure our interpretations are ones others could support, and this is the reason why self-study requires not only a critical friend, but also a critical community' (p. 1226). LaBoskey (2004) suggests that this is an exemplar-based form of validity since a study receives validation when other investigators become meaningfully involved and benefit from the self and collective reflections that a particular study provides. However, it is important not to assume that pure collaboration or enlightenment can be achieved; there is always a need for the researcher to acknowledge the ways in which his or her own interests and authority have favoured particular interpretations and representations. It is for this reason that self-study researchers should be cognisant of articulating how and why their interpretations should be considered trustworthy (Craig 2009). As Loughran (2007) suggests, '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' (p. 15).

Final Thoughts: Self-Study as a Provisionally Rational Form of Inquiry

We draw this initial discussion to a close by proposing the idea that self-study research represents a provisionally rational form of inquiry. At first glance, such a proposal may seem counter-intuitive to doing good research since one's beliefs should be derived in a rational way from available evidence and be consistent with one's reasons to believe. By suggesting that self-study is a provisionally rational project we are indicating the need to resist those forms of technocratic rationality that frame educational issues as easily defined, stable, and capable of being solved by generic principles or linear heuristics. In contrast, we are suggesting that self-study proceeds with sensitivity to the inherent difficulties of overcoming the contingent, interdependent, and embodied nature of human life. When viewed in this way, educational problems become difficult to define since the nature of the problem depends on the perspective of the stakeholder. It also acknowledges that educational problems may have multiple causalities and internal interdependencies that necessitate a range of coordinated and interrelated responses (Bore and Wright 2009; Ovens et al. 2013). As a consequence, we suggest there is a need to take a cautionary approach to both the way the existential set of practices the self is performing are problematised, and the rhetorical and narrative nature of making these performances available for analysis and generalisation.

Understanding the limits of rationality involves calling into question the nature of the relationship between reality-as-experienced and the textual representation of this reality. While poststructuralism has provided a valuable way of problematising this relationship by focusing attention on the centrality of language in the organisation of human experience (Barker and Galansinski 2001; Wood and Kroger 2000),

there is also a need to consider 'how the body is not only a physical location on which society inscribes its effects, but a material source of social categories and relations and a sensual means by which people are attached to or dislocated from social forms' (Shilling 2004, p. xvii). This sensitivity to embodiment recognises that the body is a medium for making sense and making connections with a world in people co-participate in creating (Macintyre Latta and Buck 2008). A sensitivity to the corporeal nature of organising human experience recognises that bodies are resourced with a range of cognitive, affective, and movement capabilities that generate both sensual and symbolic meanings as an acculturation process of living in, and inhabiting, the world (Evans, Davies, and Rich 2009). Such trends reject a simple mirroring thesis between reality and empirical facts, and shifts attention to the processes of interpretation, identity construction, and reflexivity as being central to research activity (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). These linguistic and embodied turns, where reality is taken to be 'created' in the sensual, social, and textual constructions of the researcher, directly challenges the key assumptions held in a rationalist social science that reality exists independently of researchers' attempts to render it through research methods.

While a sense of rationality ensures self-study is sensitive to issues of method to ensure that it is disciplined, open-minded and evidence-based, at the same it needs to allow the researcher(s) to bring creativity and insight to the process. When framed as a provisionally rational project, self-study becomes more than a set of techniques, or an exercise in patience, or application of intelligence, or accumulation of evidence. It values alongside these qualities the ability to sense, feel, think, and act with imagination in order to open up more useful interpretive possibilities. In self-study, imagination is a quality the researcher brings to the research process so that data works to spark and generate ideas rather than simply verify and support (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). Imagination foregrounds knowledge building as a 'fabrication' in the sense that the role of the researcher should be construed as a 'producer' rather than 'finder' of knowledge about the world (Foucault 1980). Findings, theories, and models are not representations of a universe that exists independently, but are only ever the provisional tools by which we negotiate our understanding and being in the world (Osberg et al. 2008). As those reading this book will come to see, when invoked as a form of inquiry in which the quest is not for more accurate understandings of a finished reality, self-study becomes a powerful means for finding ways to initiate a more meaningful interaction with the self as producer, reproducer, and product of practice.

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