Chapter 16
Critically Inquiring as Community Through Self-Study Communities of Practice

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Abstract Collaboration among teacher educators has emerged as a fundamental feature of the self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP). Although collaborative self-study and critical friendship can involve any number of people, most self-studies involve two to three teacher educators. This chapter, considers the potential of self-study communities of practice (SSCoP) of four or more, as defined by Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker, to build capacity and community. This is particularly important today for two reasons. First, S-STEP needs to look beyond the individual stories to larger theoretical, methodological, and practical questions in the field. Second, there is a need to improve teacher educations programs, not just individual courses, This chapter reviews the history of self-study communities of practice and considers how these larger-scale collaborations can contribute to advancing self-study as a discourse community and to the improvement of teacher education programs. After SSCoPs are introduced, four standards for quality offered, and eight characteristics of SSCoP identified. The author's experiences in a SSCoP from 2007 to 2012 are used to illustrate the strengths, challenges, and possibilities of such communities. The chapter conclude by highlighting two recent self-studies, one by an established team and the other by an emerging community of practice.

The self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP), according to Loughran (2004), began as "a 'coming together' of like-minded people with similar interests, issues and concerns" regarding teacher education (p. 13). They were open to employing "a remarkable range of methods to address questions arising from their own practices and teacher education contexts (p. 17). Given the strong sense of community that developed among these like-minded teacher educators, collaboration soon emerged as a fundamental feature of S-STEP (Lighthall, 2004). LaBoskey

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(2004) included interactivity with colleagues among the five criteria for designing well-executed self-studies. While LaBoskey's (2004) conception of "interactions with our colleagues near and far" included students and educational literature (p. 859), critical friendship emerged as a popular methodology for demonstrating this design feature, while also contributing to trustworthiness. Although collaborative self-study and critical friendship can involve any number of people, most self-studies involve two to three teacher educators. In this chapter, I suggest that self-study communities of practice (SSCoP) of four or more, as defined by Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009), are a natural extension of critical friendship and collaborative self-study, one that has the potential to build capacity and community.

This is particularly important today for two reasons. First, S-STEP needs to "look beyond individual stories of practice to the bigger theoretical, methodological, and practical questions that should engage the field in the 2020s and beyond" (Kitchen, 2020b, p. 1025). Second, to improve teacher educations programs, not just individual courses, S-STEP practitioners need to engage with each other locally, nationally, and internationally to improve the teacher candidate experience across courses and field experiences (Kitchen, 2020a).

I review the history of self-study communities of practice and consider how these larger-scale collaborations can contribute to advancing self-study as a discourse community and to the improvement of teacher education programs. I begin by introducing self-study community of practice, offering four standards for quality, and identifying eight characteristics of SSCoP. My experiences in a SSCoP from 2007 to 2012 are used to illustrate the strengths, challenges, and possibilities of such communities.

While I look back on my own experiences of collaboration in community, my intent in this chapter is to draw attention to SSCoP as a conception of larger-scale collaboration. I propose that its terms and insights might support current and future teacher educators as they engage in the deeper and larger-scale collaborations necessary to the advancement of self-study as an approach to improving practice within and across teacher education programs. With this in my mind, I conclude by highlighting two recent self-studies by an established and an emerging community of practice.

16.1 What Are Self-Study Communities of Practice?

The term *self-study communities of practice* was coined by Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) for "groups of at least four members committed to working together to study their teacher education practices" (p. 108). The term was inspired by the popularity of professional learning communities (PLC) at the time (e.g., DuFour & Eaker, 1998). PLCs were notable for improving teaching practice through shared expertise, collaboration, life-long learning, care, respect, and commitment to and reflection of continuous renewal (Elmore, 1997). While acknowledging many

notable collaborations in the self-study community, we observed that most were pairs or triads within an education college or across institutions. We suggested there was "a need to widen [self-study's] influence within education colleges and across the field of teacher education" (p. 108). We were inspired by the examples of the Arizona Group and the self-study group at University of Northern Iowa to develop a self-study community at Brock University. We envisioned larger scale collaborative teams as a means of "supporting existing self-study practitioners" and "draw[ing] more teacher educators into self-study" (p. 111). The activities of our group of nine of teacher educators, which started upon my arrival at Brock in 2006, was featured as an exemplar of how to establish a community of practice and of the inquiry process in such a community.

At the time, there was little research published on the work of collaborative self-study teams of four or more practitioners. As we had formed a group of nine at Brock, we were aware of the challenges collaboration presented on a larger scale. Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) wrote:

> It is our belief that communities of four or more members possess different characteristics and need to be distinguished from smaller, more close-knit groups. Each additional member increases the complexity of the web of relationships and increases the likelihood that not all members will have their personal and professional needs addressed. Also, as membership widens to include individuals from different research traditions, there is a greater need to negotiate group dynamics and shared understandings. (p. 110)

We recognized, through reading the dialogue among members of the Arizona Group (e.g., Guilfoyle et al., 2004), that effective communication was essential to the creation of our self-study community. We noted that the establishment of trust and the structuring of a self-study process were critical to the formation of a self-study community involving a diverse instructional team at George Mason University (Samaras et al., 2006). At the University of Northern Iowa, key members were deeply concerned with ensuring that the *necessary conditions* for effective self-study communities of practice were maintained despite the overlapping and intersecting self-study teams, (East & Fitzgerald, 2006). Our Brock group of nine, many of whom were new scholars and unfamiliar with self-study, documented our collaborative processes over several years.

Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker framed SSCoP around four standards for quality is derived from Bodone et al.'s (2004) chapter on collaboration in the *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices*. We also identified eight characteristics of effective communities, adapted from Clark's (2001) characteristics of authentic conversation, which were organized under the four standards. These characteristics, as well as strengths and challenges, are illustrated below through examples from papers by Kitchen, Ciuffetelli Parker and Gallagher (2009), Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009), and Gallagher (2011) on the Brock SSCoP. Consideration is also given to the challenges of sustaining s over a longer term.

16.2 Standard 1: Establishing Conditions for Research

The first standard for quality SSCoP is the establishment of conditions for teacher educators to improve and study their practice. While many teacher educators may be receptive to self-study as a means of researching practice, most are not afforded structured opportunities and, thus, do not develop a program of research on practice. The Arizona Group, the first SSCoP, was formed by four doctoral students who recognized an absence of such conditions (Guilfoyle et al., 2004). Their eagerness to widen the circle even further contributed to the formation of S-STEP (Loughran, 2004). A SSCoP at University of Northern Iowa with an amorphous membership continues to thrive after 20 years thanks to the conditions of fellowship and productivity established by core members (East & Fitzgerald, 2006). For over 20 years, Samaras has been at the centre of multiple self-study clusters, often transdisciplinary, at George Mason University, as well as with partners at other institutions (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015). The self-study community at Brock was formed in 2007, after two co-chairs (Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker and Tiffany Gallagher) identified a need for a support group a large group of new tenure-track hires over three years. As I was a newly hired faculty member with experience in self-study, I joined them in inviting colleagues to join a self-study group for pre-tenure faculty. The four characteristics of authentic conversation (Clark, 2001) in this section offer insight into how to establish conditions for a self-study community of practice.

16.2.1 Characteristic 1: Self-Study Community Involvement Is Voluntary

It is important that engagement in conversation and collaboration be voluntary and based on a common sense of purpose (Clark, 2001). The 12 A group of nine recently hired teacher education professors had "already bonded well, wished to strengthen these relationships" (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 161). They volunteered to attend monthly meetings because they had a common purpose: a desire to improve their teaching while becoming published scholars of practice. Smaller clusters were formed to help community members explore their distinct fields of practice.

While affinity brought the group together, there were challenges that diminished commitment. "Time constraints were a source of tension from the outset" (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 162), as it was difficult to find convenient meeting times with faculty spread across two campuses and several people living at least an hour from either campus. Also, the pressing compulsory duties of professors—teaching, scholarship and service— diminished interest in a voluntary, non-essential group. After one year, three members withdrew for these reasons. After four years, the SSCoP disbanded as all members were involved in independent and pressing projects. I, for

example, was heavily involved in a large Indigenous teacher education research project and was writing a textbook in education law.

16.2.2 Characteristic 2: Self-Study Community Happens on Common Ground

Common ground is a second characteristic of well-established SSCoPs. Good conversation, as evidenced in the Arizona and Northern Iowa groups, requires a space in which the authority of each member's voice is valued and there is a respectful sharing of values, ideas, and fears (Clark, 2001). Although the nine original faculty came from varying backgrounds and disciplines, we shared "a need for our voices to be heard beyond the formal… meetings and recognized the potential for us to get to know each other and to support each other's work" (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 162). We also committed to providing common ground by establishing norms of respect and a safe space in which to examine our ideas and practices. We set a positive tone through our individual interactions with group members and modelled respectful discourse in the first few sessions.

During the first year, individuals and groups presented perspectives on teacher education practices or the experience of being a new professor that resonated with the discussions at hand. Darlene's discussion of her duty as coordinator of the teaching methods courses, for example, resonated with Tiffany's duty as coordinator of the educational psychology courses. Illumination of the tension of new faculty assuming these roles was made evident through sharing stories regarding the responsibilities that were associated with being a course coordinator. Relating to others' experiences contributed to the cohesion of the group. Participation afforded members the opportunity to reflect critically on their respective roles in the department and to move forward from this new perspective.

Establishing common ground is critical to establishing the conditions for authentic conversations about teacher education research and practices. Once this common ground was established, members used this space to probe more deeply into their individual and collective self-studies of teacher education practices (Gallagher et al., 2011).

16.2.3 Characteristic 3: Self-Study Community Requires Safety, Trust and Care

The authentic quality of our conversations as a self-study group would not have been possible without the characteristic of safety, trust, and care (Clark, 2001). As we wrote after our first year:

> The opening presentations by Julian and Darlene, in which they made explicit their tensions as teacher educators, encouraged openness. The thoughtfulness of the oral and written responses, modeled in part by the facilitators, also created a safe place for sharing and further research. (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 163)

Finding time to meet in a safe place was particularly challenging given the competing and ever-pressing demands of teaching, scholarship, and service. Darlene reflected:

> I think everyone appreciated the natural extension and flow of conversation that linked our last session with this one. It was a nice feeling of communal effort/safety in sharing our work. I am noticing that the more we gather in our group, the safer, more collegial, friendly and exciting it is becoming. (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 163)

Although a safe atmosphere must be cultivated not commanded (Clark, 2001), one of the factors that contributed to a trusting and caring atmosphere was a predictable structure for meetings during the first year. Unfortunately, while safety and sharing remained meaningful when we met, distances and other priorities made it difficult to structure regularly meeting, which led to a falling off after several years. Closer proximity, combined with a committed core, has allowed SSCoPs at the University of Northern Iowa and George Mason to remain robust.

16.2.4 Characteristic 4: Self-Study Community Members Share Struggles Through Conversation

As a self-study community becomes established, it needs to engage in meaningful dialogue related to more sensitive topics and experiences. As Guilfoyle et al. (2004) emphasize, "Conversation moves from beyond mere talk to become dialogue when it contains critique and reflection—when ideas are not simply stated but endure intense questioning, analysis, alternative interpretations, and synthesis" (pp. 1155–1156). "The issue that bound members and surfaced in most group conversations over the first two years was the promotion and tenure process," according to Gallagher et al. (2011, p. 884). This issue was particularly pressing as Brock had recently transitioned to being a comprehensive university with heightened research expectations for faculty. In this article, Gallagher and peers illustrated how a day devoted to discussion about the evolving institutional context and teacher education culture led to shared understanding and a collective resolve to work through the issues. Self-study was of particular interest as it had the potential to increase research productivity while improving practice. While sharing struggles was important, it is crucial that all members participate actively in group conversations. The initial group sessions were led by experienced facilitators attentive to the verbal and nonverbal cues from others and committed to engaging all members. As Guilfoyle et al. (2004) wrote, "Dialogue is not owned by any participant...The one 'requirement' is that it be sustained through active participation, keeping the ball in the air" (p. 1333).

For a self-study group to become a scholarly learning community, members need to reveal their struggles and engage in critique and reflection.

16.3 Standard 2: Creating Educational Knowledge

At the heart of self-study is creating educational knowledge and improving our teacher education practices. As Clark (2001) stresses, "the heart of conversational learning for teachers is about ourselves" in relation to the learning needs of our students (p. 177). Extending this to tenure-track faculty, conversation in community should also lead to research on practice.

16.3.1 Characteristic 5: Self-Study Community Members Explore Their Teaching Through Collective Dialogue

As academics in the Brock group, we sought to be both practical and scholarly in our inquiries. The tone was set in the first session with my presentation of a published self-study into providing reflective feedback. (Kitchen, 2008). This and subsequent self-study presentations on issues emerging from members' teaching practice, resonated with members of the community. A particularly lively collective dialogue was prompted by Louis Volante's collaborative self-study inquiry with Darlene on preparing feedback to teacher candidates during practica. After Louis critiqued the assessment tool, Darlene encouraged him to use self-study to probe further. Together, they documented their experiences and reflected on the frustrations they experienced using the same detailed checklist used by supervising teachers. Dialogue in response to this presentation was lively, as everyone had just returned from evaluating the first practicum. Each of us had experienced frustration with this assessment tool, with some drawing on experiences in other universities to bolster the call for reform. "All members are intently listening to this conversation. This discussion had the potential to alter the very purpose of our role as faculty counsellors and require a complete examination of the whole organization of the department," wrote Tiffany (Reflection, December 13, 2006). In Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009), we recalled, "Although Louis was new to self-study, he was able to combine his expert knowledge of assessment with reflection to present a forceful, scholarly and personal inquiry into practice" (p. 122). After further data collection, reflection and critical analysis, their article was accepted for publication (Ciuffetelli Parker & Volante, 2009) by *Studying Teacher Education*. The journal editors identified the pairing of self-study and assessment as a valuable new contribution to the field. This served as a further indication that our self-study dialogue fostered meaningful scholarship.

Studying our teacher education practices in a self-study community both deepened our understandings of practice and developed a mutually respectful

community of practice among new faculty. We modelled collegiality within a scholarly learning community and, through our publications in peer-reviewed journals, received external validation for our explorations of teaching through collective dialogue. The sharing of such dialogue, along with reflection and critique as a SSCoP, has the potential to inform engagement by other groups.

16.3.2 Characteristic 6: Self-Study Communities Critically Examine Their Group Processes and Dynamics

As conversation groups develop, according to Clark (2001), "participants find their voices, the conversational floor opens to greater complexity, depth, and tolerance of uncertainty" (p. 179). In the first year, members increasingly found their voices as they became comfortable in the group and with self-study. This was most evident when the four members least familiar with self-study formed their own self-study group to explore their professional identities as teacher educators, leading to a conference symposium (Figg et al. 2007).

Just as the Arizona Group "walked through a variety of discourses' in their "progression" in "discourse as a way of knowing" (Guilfoyle et al., 2004, p. 1135), we examined our group processes and dynamics in order to make adaptations in our second year as a self-study community: For example, we reflected on the interactions in a session Tiffany led on co-authoring with graduate students. Some questioned the value of such work, with one questioning the ethics of taking credit for student work. Nonetheless, reflections on the session indicated that "members left the meeting feeling empowered, as well as "open to diverse views, able to cope with uncertainty, and… [able] to work through conversational differences in opinions" (Kitchen et al., 2008, p. 166).

16.4 Standards 3 and 4: Recreating Teacher Education and Contributing to the Public Discourse of Communities of Practice

At the heart of self-study as a research methodology is the creation of knowledge that can improve teacher education practices internally and in the wider teacher education discourse community. . Research on self-study communities of practice should illustrate by example and in scholarship how self-study leads to deeper to understandings about teacher education as practiced in our classroom contexts. Belonging to an international self-study community offers a "liberating shift of perspective" and validation from the self-study community enhances "commitment to collaborative engagement with colleagues" (Fitzgerald et al., 2002, p. 214).

16.4.1 Characteristic 7: Self-Study Communities Explore Teacher Education Reform

As new faculty in a department undergoing a significant program review, we were eager to transform a respected yet dated teacher education program. As team leaders for our disciplines, we recognized we were well positioned to reform teacher education at the classroom level. Yet we felt thwarted by resistance to change among senior faculty and sessional instructors from the field of teaching.

A session of the SSCoP was devoted to reviewing and critiquing the faculty retreat on teacher education. In our session the retreat's discussion was characterized as "definitely set, … close ended and administrative in nature" (Gallagher et al., 2011, p. 886). Our stories of the retreat resonated as we related to "each other's struggles and triumphs as teacher educators and [felt] the conflicts together" (p. 886). This meeting featured sharing practices, particularly related to cohorts and practice teaching, and resolved many members to push for dramatic reform.

Studying teacher education practices through self-study enhanced our understanding of the intricacies of teacher education and promoted a community of practice within our faculty. Our work as teacher education reformers, however, would lead us to the initiative in a major overhaul of the program when the province extended the length of programs in Ontario (Kitchen & Sharma, 2017).

16.4.2 Characteristic 8: Self-Study Communities Move Toward the Future

Authentic conversation, in addition to contributing to the immediate personal and professional needs of the participants, "becomes a means for organizing ourselves for future action in our classrooms and schools" (Clark, 2001, p. 180). The SSCoP helped develop among us a sense of identity as scholars of teacher education, with many members studying their practice over the coming years. As our scholarly identities evolved, however, we each became increasingly involved in discourse communities related to our areas of specialization as teacher educators and scholars. This had the effect of dramatically increasing the research contributions of faculty, but largely outside of self-study. Others have been more successful in this regard. The University of Northern Iowa group, despite shifting membership over the years, continues to introduce. Anastasia Samaras at George Mason University continues to partner with colleagues internally and internationally. Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, a long-time collaborator with Samaras, has developed a strong network of self-study practitioners in South Africa (e.g., Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2015). Even when a SSCoP had run its course, as was the case with the Arizona Group, key members continued to study their practice and contribute to the development of self-study (e.g., Pinnegar et al., 2020).

16.5 Self-Study Communities of Practice Today and Tomorrow

"While collaboration is a hallmark of S-STEP, more could be done to make this explicit in our scholarship," wrote Kitchen and Berry (2019, p. 93). In addition to "including such terms in article titles and in the keywords that are critical to searching online databases" (p. 93), there is a need to distinguish among critical friendship, collaborative self-study, and larger communities of practice. This will be crucial as self-study becomes increasingly collaborative, and as collaborations become larger in scale.

First, the term self-study communities of practice is useful in understanding the dynamics in existing collaborations among self-study collectives of four or more teacher educators, such as the team surrounding Tim Fletcher and Déirdre Ní Chróinín. Fletcher and Ní Chróinín have established a substantive body of work as critical friends and collaborators in self-study and in physical education. While their "six-year collaboration with self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) and critical friendship" began with a critical friendship between pen pals (Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2020), their work became increasingly collaborative and widened in scope to include multiple collaborators and co-authors, as well as a wider circle engaged in parallel work. They have written extensively with Mary O'Sullivan (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2016; Ní Chróinín et al., 2018), as well as a wider group of physical educators (e.g., Ní Chróinín et al., 2019). Their circle has widened to include other teacher educators who also explore dimensions of their practice through self-study. Notable examples of this are two recent articles in *Studying Teacher Education.* O'Dwyer and Bowles "acted as critical friends for each other" while Ní Chróinín served as an external critical friend (O'Dwyer et al., 2019). In O'Dwyer et al. (2020), O' Dwyer, an early career teacher educator, engages simultaneously in self-studies of science teaching and football coaching with critical friends. While the terms critical friendship and collaboration accurately convey the dynamics within individual studies, they do not capture the complexity and richness of the larger collaborative community that has developed around Ní Chróinín and Fletcher. Self-study community of practice is a term that more fully captures the complex and interconnected body of work being emerging from this productive collaborative cluster. It would also be interesting to learn more about how they navigate the standards and challenges identified by Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker. Indeed, they could probably offer deeper insights that would advance SSCoP research.

Second, and more importantly, the term is useful as a guide to emerging self-study collaborators and critical friends. One of the joys of being an editor of *Studying Teacher Education* is discovering new talent and interesting new work. One source of such joy was Appleget et al. (2020). This diverse team of four early career American teacher educators met at a national conference, at which they discovered a shared commitment to extending "culturally responsive pedagogies into [their]literacy methods courses" (p. 286). This led them to form a self-study as "a beneficial way for us to examine our teaching practices and exchange ideas with the support

of critical friends who were on the same journey" (p. 286). Their article makes an important contribution to self-study by introducing culturally proactive pedagogies and through their use of a critical friend collective as a means for accountability in social justice work. In editorial feedback to the authors, I wrote, "You could stress the significance of being a team of four. If I was looking at this at an earlier stage [before acceptance], I might have suggested framing yourselves as a 'community of practice.'" I then drew their attention to SSCoP as an alternative framing that might better capture the complexities of working as a large collaborative unit. In their concluding thoughts, the authors touched upon the term and indicated an interest in studying their collaboration in relation to the SSCoP literature. Later, I drew the unpublished article to the attention of the editors of this volume, who offered them the opportunity to write a chapter on their work as a self-study community of practice. Appleget et al. (in this volume) draw on four standards to help frame their self-study on their journey as collaborators and critical friends. As this team continue to study their use of culturally proactive pedagogies, it will be interesting to see how they develop as a self-study community of practice. By sharing the story of their journey, they hope to "inspire other scholars to follow research paths using SSCoP."

If self-study is to move from small-scale initiatives to a movement involving large numbers of teacher educators within institutions, nationally and internationally, more attention needs to be devoted to developing self-study communities of practice and critically inquiring into the work of these communities. Such communities, in addition to supporting existing self-study practitioners, could draw more teacher educators into self-study. Inquiry into practice on a larger scale could, in turn, lead to the further development and enactment of a pedagogy of teacher education (Russell & Loughran, 2007). The conception of SSCoP outlined in Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) can serve as a traveler's guide to the journey.

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