
Understanding Self-Study Research

What and Why

To my surprise, of all the projects I have worked on to date, my self-study research project has been the most practical. . . . The insights I gained about myself, my colleagues, and the position have helped me enormously. Self-study forced me to think outside the box in new ways, and it changed my way of thinking, despite myself.

—Mary Adams-Legge (2006), *English Teacher and Department Chair, Frederick County Public Schools, Virginia*

CHAPTER DESCRIPTION

This first chapter introduces you to self-study teacher research and immediately prompts you to consider its usefulness to your practice. You will have an opportunity to play with your wonderments, to ponder and sketch out what may become your research question. You will also share your unrefined ideas with a peer. In that way, you will learn about self-study while gaining an overview of the research process. You will be introduced to what self-study is and what it is not. Then the discussion moves to the very important question of “Why conduct self-study research?” which includes personal professional accountability, applicability, and reforming in the first person with critical friends. Self-study teacher research puts you at the center of an inquiry you choose.

◆ Reading this chapter will provide an opportunity for you to gain a basic understanding of what self-study is, what it is not, what it entails, and how it broadly benefits students, teachers, and education more generally.

Self-study has always been a part of my teaching although I did not call it self-study. I remember my early years of teaching junior high school students in the early '70s. After a day of teaching, I would come home and reflect deeply and silently about my role in classroom events, how my teaching philosophy played out in my actual practice, the problems I encountered, and what part of myself I brought to students' learning. I welcomed conversations with my teacher colleague, Kathy Lawson, whom I talked with about ideas to improve my teaching. I had not been taught to study my teaching in any teacher education methods course. It just seemed to be what I did. Now, after four decades of teaching and researching in a wide variety of education settings, I still have an insatiable passion toward self-study teacher research. I still enjoy personal inquiry and spend enormous amounts of energy thinking about and talking about my teaching with colleagues. I find self-study to be a challenging, yet emancipating, process because it allows me to better understand who I am as a teacher and who my students are as learners.

A Self-Study Teacher Researcher *Can!*

- ✓ I can design a study driven from my questions situated in my particular context.
- ✓ I can work in an intellectually safe and highly supportive collaborative inquiry community with critical friends.
- ✓ I can question the status quo of my teaching in order to improve and impact learning for myself and for my students.
- ✓ I can study my practice through employing a transparent, open, reflective, and systematic research process.
- ✓ I can hold a disposition of openness to outside views, questions, and critique.
- ✓ I can use various self-study methods to study my practice.
- ✓ I can contribute to the knowledge base of teaching as a knower and not just a receiver of knowledge.
- ✓ I can generate and share knowledge that can be useful to other teachers and educators.

With these privileges comes ethical responsibility, which you will read about in Chapter 7.

You might be wondering if self-study research and collaborative inquiry are an oxymoron. Now, this may surprise you, but self-study research actually requires that you work with someone else: a critical friend. Granted, the word *self-study* doesn't sound like it is collaborative, but actually this research necessitates collaboration (LaBoskey, 2004a). That is right. First, teacher inquiry begins with you. The power of your personal narrative to define the parameters of your own classroom inquiry must be at the forefront of your academic

thinking and professional development. You are a generator of knowledge who can learn about your teaching and about your students' learning by studying your own classroom. Despite any frustrations you might have in trying to change the educational system, the one thing you know you can try to improve and change is yourself. And yet, that change requires support and constructive critique.

The Beatles' famous 1967 song, "With a Little Help From My Friends," reminds us of how our lives, relationships, and work are interconnected. **Self-study research** builds on the necessity of a relationship between individual and collective cognition in teachers' professional development and the power of dialogue in building a learning community of engaged scholarship (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Samaras, Freese, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus the textbook's subtitle, *Improving Your Practice Through Collaborative Inquiry*. As teachers raise their own questions generated from their practice, critical friends serve to mediate, provoke, and support new understandings. Self-study requires working with a *critical friend*, which is a term used widely by self-study scholars. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) note that it is "a term coined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) to denote a person who will listen to a researcher's account of practice and critique the thinking behind the account" (p. 256). Although related, "critical friends" in self-study research are not the same as Critical Friends Groups (CFG) established by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in 1994 and with the CFG training coordinated by the National School Reform Faculty since the summer of 2000 (<http://www.nsrffharmony.org/index.html>).

Critical friends are trusted colleagues who seek support and validation of their research to gain new perspectives in understanding and reframing of their interpretations. Critical friends also "nurture a community of intellectual and emotional caring" (Pine, 2009, p. 236) through their commitment to inquiry and ongoing support throughout the research process. We will talk more about critical collaborative inquiry throughout this text, but for now, try your hand at Critical Friend Inquiry 1.1 as an exercise to practice sharing your personal insights for feedback and critical review from a colleague (Loughran & Northfield, 1998).



CRITICAL FRIEND INQUIRY 1.1

Self-study research allows you to openly ask questions about your teaching practice. It is a research process that allows you to choose your own research question about something that captures your attention and needs your attention in your classroom. Self-study allows you to enact research inside your classroom while you receive support and direction from your peers. It allows you to plan, enact, and assess your efforts and examine the impact of your efforts on your students' learning.

What questions have you been asking yourself lately about your teaching? What teaching issues or tensions do you find yourself thinking about and talking about constantly with your colleagues? What do you want to better understand? Is there something you wish was different? Do not worry that your ideas are not polished. These are sketches and not final research questions.

First, like artists, take pen or computer in hand and sketch out what you wonder about in your practice. Write your first initial thoughts. Be curious about your teaching. Reflect on a problem that might initiate a study, but as Loughran (2004) illuminates, a “problem in this case is not a negative term . . . [but] linked to the notion of a curious or puzzling situation or dilemma, tension, issue, or concern. It is something that causes one to stop and pay more careful attention to a given situation” (p. 25).

I wonder about _____ because _____.

Take a moment to jot down your initial and very raw responses to the three short questions in this activity. Find a critical friend who is also interested in working with you on your research project. To be highly effective, “both members should be partners in the self-study . . . prepared to share, on an equal basis” to avoid an unbalanced status of researcher and critique (Schuck & Segal, 2002, p. 100).

1. What do you wonder about in your teaching practice? I wonder about _____ because _____.
2. Why is this issue important to you? What experiences and perspectives brought you to ask this question?
3. Who would benefit from addressing this question (e.g., you, your students, your school, a school division, society at large)?

Below is a student example.



Student Example

ESOL Teacher

Here's an example of a teacher's pondering drawn from his personal history and education-related life experiences.

What do you wonder about in your teaching practice?

I wonder about what role I can play as a Hispanic teacher in helping Hispanic students survive and understand biology.

Why this issue or question?

This question is important to me because of my background as a Hispanic and the fact that I was an ESL [English as a Second Language] student for a brief period of time.

Who would benefit from addressing this question?

Many would benefit from addressing this question: ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] teachers, students, parents, and other teachers. I want to work to improve ESOL students' weak performance in school.

Source: Student Work (2008). *Improving ESOL instruction based on my one-on-one instruction*. Paper submitted to the Secondary Education Program, Graduate School of Education, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education.



1.1 Advice From a Self-Study Scholar

Openness and Collaboration

Establishing a team of critical friends is an important first step for self-study teachers. Critical friends are important to self-study because self-study calls for openness and collaboration. Openness means making your classroom teaching public and sharing your work and ideas with colleagues and students. Openness is crucial to improving your teaching, but it also leaves you vulnerable and open to critique. Trust, then, becomes a vital element in establishing and sustaining a team of critical friends. Finding and choosing colleagues who are honest, supportive, collaborative, and committed to the goals of self-study is vital in the process of helping you consider and gain insight into your work.

Patience A. Sowa
Zayed University, United Arab Emirates

Next, share your wonderment with a peer whom you may decide to continue to work with as your critical friend.

Present what you wrote and ask each other for clarifications. What did you inquire about? Why are you curious about this question? Who would benefit from addressing this question? Take notes on the responses and comments you receive and further questions that are generated from your discussion. As in all the critical friend work, reverse roles and repeat the activity again with your critical friend's research. One of the first and key steps in the self-study research process is establishing and sustaining your critical friend team.

Establishing Your Critical Friend Team

Create a Working Structure.

Create a working structure for critique and support. Critical friends are tasked with two principle roles: to offer critique and to provide support (Breslin et al., 2008). Discuss and agree on your working structure. Establish ground rules with critical friends and revisit and reclarify them often. Openly share what is working and what is not working in your critical friend inquiries. Discuss and negotiate any problematic issues early and regularly. Practice professional ethics. Honor confidentiality about each other's work. The accessibility and reliability of your critical friends will help ease anxiety for participants. Agree on a structure for how and when the feedback will be posted, such as through regularly scheduled meetings, progress reports, and/or memos. You might decide to use an Internet group forum space or a wiki to post, respond, and store each other's memos. While sharing electronically allows for

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documents to be easily shared and recorded, "a critical friendship may be more successful and mutually satisfying when it includes face-to-face interaction as well" (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 120).

Take a Critical Approach.

Take a critical approach to each other's research. It is critical to have friends in research, but critical friends are not critical in their approach with each other. Be clear and open about your responsibilities and commitment to each other in the mutual task of developing, enacting, and assessing your self-study research. Use active listening (i.e., listening for each other without judgment and without personal agendas). Critical friend work is not a blaming game about your teaching or a diatribe about your students' deficits in learning. Rather, its purpose is "to examine the possibilities and limitations of pedagogy" (Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008, p. 414). The role of a critical friend is pivotal to the developmental process of self-study research. Check in regularly with each other and talk about "the level of critical commentary with which each feels comfortable" (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 120).

Embrace Alternative Perspectives.

Embrace alternative perspectives for improving the quality of your research. Critical friends serve to support each other's efforts while encouraging each other to be open to change in the changing world of teaching. Critical friends serve as validators who provide feedback, help shape research, and work as a validation team to provide feedback on the quality and legitimacy of claims as they "scrutinize your progress report and evidence" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005, p. 11). Asking questions about data, interpretations, analysis, and assertions, critical friends are a valuable source in the research process and for "confirming and disconfirming evidence for our understandings and assertions for action" (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 15).

Acknowledge the Complexity of Collaboration.

Collaboration is a complex process. According to John-Steiner (2000), collaboration is "charged both cognitively and emotionally" (p. 124), and in productive working relationships "making oneself known and heard is central to emotional survival and growth" (p. 146). Optimal feedback includes both cognitive and emotional support (Breslin et al., 2008; Samaras et al., 2007). There are differences in how people approach and work in a critical friend team, but utmost is the need for honesty, openness, and transparency of any problems that are surfacing. Trust is not a given but is a privilege developed over time with a mutual commitment to each other's work. As Klein, Riordian, Schwartz, and Sotirhos (2008) state in their work as critical friends in a dissertation support group, "people need to believe they can both meet their own needs and others' needs; in particular, we found it was essential to care for the ideas of other members" (p. 128). A class community of critical friends suggests that it is important to "enter the community with an open mind, honoring each other's individual strengths and valuing each other's contributions" (Samaras et al., 2008, p. 145).

Congratulations!

What you just accomplished is the first component of the self-study teacher research process; you initiated the beginnings of a personal situated inquiry. Research is not something that some teachers do. Research is what all teachers do. It is a logical extension of your teaching. You conduct research informally every single day of your teaching life when you wonder and try something new and assess how it worked or how it did not work. You are not trying to prove something. You are trying to understand something. Your classroom is a living laboratory for your personal understanding of your development, work, and growth as a teacher. Picture the internal monologue that is occurring in your head when you teach. Learning to follow through and engage in that monologue and hear your voice and your students' voices inside your classroom is empowering. Teaching thinking, action, and self-study about that action is research. Consider how research is "an ongoing process of discovery that leads the researcher to focus on the complex interactions that occur during the learning and teaching process" (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 83).

WHAT IS SELF-STUDY TEACHER RESEARCH?

One of the first questions my students ask me when I talk about self-study is "What *is* self-study research?" It sounds like an analytical study that is all about you. It is easy to get stuck on asking what self-study is, but the really important question is "Why self-study for teachers?" Nonetheless, we will begin with "what" self-study is and is not to help you understand the "why" of it. And so, we begin with these two questions: What is self-study teacher research? What is not self-study teacher research? Let's get started.

I have had many incredible discussions about self-study research with my self-study colleagues. For over a decade, we have read volumes of literature about self-study, listened attentively to each other's conference presentations, and read each other's writings, all the while acknowledging the multiple and multifaceted nature of self-study. With colleagues, I have coedited books and self-study conference proceedings (Kosnik, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2006; Samaras, Freese, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008; Kosnik, Freese, & Samaras, 2002a). In a primer on self-study of teaching (Samaras & Freese, 2006), Anne Freese and I came to the conclusion that we as a community of self-study scholars have struggled to capture a definition of self-study although there has been more agreement about why self-study is important and what it entails (i.e., its characteristics and methodological components).

Let's start with considering what self-study *is* and what it *is not*, which will be useful for framing your self-study teacher research project and checking for possible research design pitfalls. The Five Foci Framework presented throughout this textbook provides a manageable format for you to understand and apply self-study in a high-quality self-study teacher research project. The framework has been gleaned, refined, and extended from almost two decades of work by self-study scholars, particularly from the work of Barnes (1998), LaBoskey (2004a), Loughran and Northfield (1998), and Samaras and Freese (2006). The framework outlines the methodological components of self-study.

Accordingly, self-study research is:

1. Personal situated inquiry
2. Critical collaborative inquiry
3. Improved learning
4. A transparent and systematic research process
5. Knowledge generation and presentation

In his efforts to understand self-study, one of my students brilliantly articulated and connected these Five Foci.

I believe self-study to be a *personal, systematic inquiry situated* within one's own teaching context that requires *critical and collaborative reflection* in order to *generate knowledge*, as well as *inform the broader educational field* (Sell, 2009a).

You will find a full discussion of these methodological components in a later chapter. They are briefly presented here by way of introduction.

Self-study is a personal situated inquiry.

Self-study draws directly from teachers' personal experience, which is situated within their classroom. Self-study teachers can initiate their own research question generated from observations of their classroom. The tensions you choose to examine are opportunities for professional growth and learning (Berry, 2007). Self-study gives you the opportunity to examine your lived practice and whether or not there is a **living contradiction**, or a contradiction between what you say you believe and what you actually do in practice (Whitehead, 1989). Examining the realities created by this gap leads to new understandings of personal theory making. The questions you pose can also be positive ones (LaBoskey, 2004a). You can choose from various self-study methods to inquire into beliefs and action in practice, explore who you are as a teacher, and self-assess your teaching. You have the opportunity to consider the role culture and history play in your theories and practices to assess its impact on your teaching.

Self-study is critical collaborative inquiry.

Self-study requires critical collaborative inquiry. It is personal and interpersonal with learning, thinking, and knowing arising through collaboration and the appropriating of feedback from others. It is the community that helps extend an individual's understanding. Critical friends encourage and solicit respectful questioning and divergent views to obtain

alternative perspectives and work to help validate the quality and legitimacy of each other's claims.

Self-study is improved learning.

Self-study is for improved learning or the “so what” of what we do as teachers. As teachers study their teaching, they work to understand and improve their work as professionals, impact students' learning, inform education and school programs, influence policy decisions, and reform education. Sometimes students ask, “What if my research does not work or result in my hoped-for outcome?” In your research efforts, you are learning what works and what does not work and the consequences of the changes you enact. You are improving your learning about your teaching as a teacher and its impact on students' learning. That is progress and research.

Self-study is a transparent and systematic research process.

Self-study is a transparent and systematic research process requiring an open, honest, and clear description of the spiral of questioning, framing, revisiting of data, and reframing of a researcher's interpretations. Self-study necessitates a disposition of openness to outside views, questions, and critique. Self-study teachers strive to make their practice explicit to themselves and to others. The transparency of the research process is enhanced through the review of critical friends who ask probing questions and offer alternative perspectives and interpretations.

Self-study is knowledge generation and presentation.

Self-study research contributes broadly to the knowledge base of personal, professional, program, and school development. Making the study public allows it to be available for review and critique. It contributes to the accumulation of pedagogical, content, and issue-based knowledge and serves to build validation across related work.

The Five Foci presented in the textbook provide a definitional framework that describes the process of self-study research first introduced here and then integrated throughout the book. It is in response to an important call by some of the founders of self-study research who wrote, “To promote self-study research, researchers could endeavor to: Work toward maintaining the integrity of self-study research through explicit adherence to methodological standards (broadly defined)” (Cole & Knowles, 1998, p. 51).

WHAT SELF-STUDY TEACHER RESEARCH IS NOT

Next, let's look at what self-study is *not* and some research design pitfalls of self-study research.

- Self-study is *not* about you studying others' personal inquiries.
- Self-study is *not* all about you and only about you.
- Self-study is *not* conducted alone.
- Self-study research is *not* merely reflection.
- Self-study is *not* only about personal knowledge.

Self-study research is not about you studying others' personal inquiries.

After reviewing a manuscript where the researcher incorrectly criticized and reported on the actions of teachers, I was reminded why the field needs self-study research. Self-study is not about studying others' inquiries. You are the researcher and also the teacher. Your position is inside, not outside, the research. While it is essential to be aware that your position as teacher does not cause you to misread or misguide your students' feedback, your position also gives you the unique opportunity to use yourself as an instrument of the research and to make explicit the tacit assumptions about your practice (Mason, 2002). Your research and analysis will help explain your role in the research and its impact on your learning and your participants' learning with data to support both. A description of your context is essential for others to draw from your experience to envision your classroom and learn from your research efforts.

Self-study research is not about you and only about you.

Self-study is not just about you and only about you. It is what you can do for your students and education. That cause is bigger than you and one that as teachers we understand and embrace fully and daily in our practice. Self-study is not narcissism. Self-study is not a psychoanalytic study of you, your childhood, and your past.

[The] invitation of a self-study (to see if the case for me is also the case for you) is not to be made passively but actively. In this respect the self-researcher is claiming that their story is not only *not* a fiction, it is not a simple psychotherapeutic confessional either. They are actively inviting the reader to see them, or their experience as they have investigated it, as "a case" of something. For most self-studiers, it seems, to claim a study as research, they are under some obligation not

just to tell the story but also to actively locate it in some more general issue, debate, problem or theoretical context that is more rather than less likely to be of interest to someone else. . . . It is not research because it is “by me, for me”; it is research because it is self-consciously “by me, for us.” (Ham & Kane, 2004, p. 117)

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) explain that self-study is about you in relation to your practice and the others who share your practice setting:

Quality self-study research requires that the researcher negotiate a particularly sensitive balance between biography and history. While self-study researchers acknowledge the role of the self in the research project . . . such study does not focus on the self per se but on the space between self and the practice engaged in. There is always a tension between those two elements, self and the arena of practice, between self in relation to practice and the others who share the practice setting. (p. 15)

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) further assert that self-study is not about making yourself look like a hero or a huge success in your research. Frankly, it is more valuable if you are willing to explain what you learned and what you might do differently. On the other hand, self-study is not equal to self-criticism. The gaze is neither entirely inward nor outward “but on the space between the self and the practice engaged in” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). When studying oneself, “If gaze is always outward, then the most valuable resource one has as a researcher, namely oneself as instrument, is denied” (Mason, 2002, p. 174). In the process of studying your teaching, you gain entry into understanding your own learning in order to teach your students better. As you develop as a professional, your ultimate goal is to positively impact your students’ learning.

Self-study research is not conducted alone.

Granted, the terminology of self-study suggests that self-study research is about the self. It is about the self, but it is not conducted alone. Indeed the nature of self-study is paradoxical on many levels (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Paradoxically, self-study is *individual and collective* (Samaras & Freese, 2006). It is about your questions that you share with others. Quality self-study research involves peer review with mutual benefits. It is about having and being a critical friend. I explain to my students that the “getting is in the giving,” or as Schuck and Russell (2005) surmise, “A critical friendship works in two directions. It is not solely for the person whose teaching is being studied; the critical friend also expects benefits” (p. 119).

Self-study entails an ongoing dialogue about your research with others to better understand it for yourself. Yet another paradox is that self-study is *personal and interpersonal* (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Your work on an interpersonal, or social, plane promotes your understanding on an intrapersonal, or personal, plane (Vygotsky, 1981). In essence, critical friends are invaluable because “learning, thinking, and knowing arise through collaboration

and reappropriating feedback from others” (Samaras, 2002, p. 80). Critical friends serve as validators who provide feedback while you are shaping your research. They also serve as your **validation team** to provide feedback on the quality and legitimacy of your claims as they “scrutinize your progress report and evidence” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005, p. 11). Thus another paradox is that self-study is *private and public* (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

Self-study research is not merely reflection.

While self-study “facilitates both inductive and deductive inquiry . . . like any systematic inquiry, self-study must be grounded in the extant literature to ensure it is not merely personal reflection” (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003, p. 161). Self-study is a “recognized discipline” of scholars “creating democratic communities of practice committed to a scholarship of educational enquiry” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 18). It is cautious and legitimate research that involves conducting a systematic and high-quality research project that is shared for critique and appraisal. Loughran (2007a) states, “Quality self-study is evident when it demonstrates . . . that it is disciplined and systematic inquiry [and] values professional learning as a research outcome” (p. 19). Self-study research has rigor, high quality, and peer review for critique and appraisal. Teacher educators work to promote self-study as a habit of mind for teachers (Lassonde & Strub, 2009). Self-study moves beyond narrative analysis and telling a story to producing new knowledge (Loughran, 2008).

As in any high-quality research, self-study researchers need to (a) clearly identify the problem or focus; (b) provide a detailed description of the situated practice; (c) explain the self-study method and why it was chosen; (d) describe the multiple data sources; (e) provide a clear explanation of any alternative forms of data employed such as artistic representation (Feldman, 2003; Mittapalli & Samaras, 2008); (f) establish trustworthiness (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000); (g) include a thorough and transparent data trail; and (h) offer a discussion of the findings to themselves, to others, and to the field.

Self-study is not only about personal knowledge.

Self-study research contributes to personal knowledge *and* to the knowledge base of teaching and education. Self-study research is for your personal and professional development. But self-study also provides the opportunity for you to contribute to the knowledge base of teaching. Teachers are contributors of knowledge. They are doers and knowers about the world of teaching who make decisions every minute of their teaching day. Teachers constantly encounter and resolve dilemmas that require continuous “in flight” assessments and decisions made through their observing the situation, educational beliefs, and collecting and analyzing data (Borko, Cone, Atwood Russo, & Shavelson, 1979). According to Schwab (1973), teaching dilemmas revolve around students, subject matter, the teacher, and the social milieu. When a teacher examines his or her role in the dilemma, it moves the conversation

and study from what others are doing to what the teacher does with others. A self-study allows the teacher to consider the impact he or she makes on students' learning. It also provides an opportunity for the teacher to share what he or she learned so other teachers might gain insights about their related research.

WHY CONDUCT SELF-STUDY TEACHER RESEARCH?

Self-study teacher research is an empowering research methodology for teachers that holds much promise for educational reform. Teacher research is not a new phenomenon, but self-study “places individual researchers at the centre of their own enquiries. . . . The individual ‘I’ is always seen to exist in company with other individual ‘I’s,’ and each asks, ‘How do I hold myself accountable to myself and to you?’” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 11). First, self-study offers you a new way to think about your professional accountability (i.e., a self-assessment of your professional development). That is, as a professional, you are accountable to yourself and to your students. Second, self-study research has instant applicability to your teaching and your students' learning. You can actually use the research findings immediately. Third, self-study as a new school of thought enables you as a teacher to reform in the first person. Self-study research demands that it is not only acceptable to include your viewpoint but actually essential to do so. Furthermore, the improvements you and other teachers enact multiply the possibilities of change on a larger scale. Let's look at these three “whys” of self-study research: personal professional accountability, applicability, and reforming in the first person with critical friends.

1. Personal Professional Accountability

As a teacher, you are accountable to your students' learning. That is a major and serious responsibility. Self-study involves a self-reflective stance in concert with self-responsibility as well as a responsibility to others. As teachers conduct self-study research projects, they are reminded about the important role they play, and *can* play, in addressing performance measures and improving the educational system. This does not mean that there should be no outside accountability. It does, however, bring to mind that change that is demanded by others is less powerful, less meaningful, and less sustainable than change that is self-initiated and self-motivated.

As a former secondary education social studies teacher, I have vivid memories of being evaluated by others, staying up late to prepare the observed lesson at the cost of other lessons, and meeting a set of ever-changing standards. One of the key ingredients in sustaining and revitalizing the teaching profession is professional accountability—one's own accountability rather than accountability demanded by others, rewarded by others, and punished by others. That personal professional accountability is developed with the support and interchange of school and university learning communities. It does take a village to build a community of mutually caring and developing teacher professionals. School districts and teacher unions, and ultimately students and their families, would benefit from a peer review process initiated by teachers instead of playing “gotcha” through outside-only review.

Additionally, school districts would save money in the long run from litigations in teacher dismissal and turnover.

In the teacher education programs where I have taught, I have observed how teachers are tempted to zero in on meeting mandated standards for their classrooms and professional portfolios at the cost of assessing their own role and practices in meeting those standards. The need for demonstrating teacher impact on student learning has increasingly gained the attention of schools and universities in a time of performance-based reform. Teachers' instructional roles are "increasingly regulated and monitored through assessment and data analysis expectations" (Valli & Buese, 2007, p. 551) and with serious negative consequences in teacher-student relationships, pedagogy, and teacher stress. One can easily argue that national and state teacher evaluation standards are a necessary and important component of teachers' professional development. And yet, the assessment of teachers does not need to rely only on evaluation by others. It does not have to create a system of competition; it has to create one of cooperation toward improving students' learning.

While teachers need to address specific mandated standards and performance-based assessment measures for student learning, the inclusion of their own professional assessment is an essential pathway toward making a difference in their students' learning. Clarke and Erickson (2004b) offer a strong argument for why self-study as a form of teacher inquiry is a part of the process of impacting students' learning:

We are claiming that student learning is a critical aspect of all teachers' practice and as such represents an important focus of their work as educators. However, without inquiry, one's teaching practice becomes perfunctory and routinised. When teachers cease to be inquisitive about their practice, their practice ceases to be professional. This is an important distinction for us; as argued earlier, "inquiry is a defining feature of professional practice," and distinguishes professional practice from labour or technical work. (p. 203)

Teacher voices need to be visible and their personal agency high in terms of having the opportunity to ask their own questions and challenge themselves as they struggle to frame and reframe their very practice. When educators propose a personal and situated inquiry and take ownership, recognition, and responsibility to undertake that inquiry in a supportive and guided forum, professional development is enhanced and fears involving the change reduced (Smith, 2003). In the age of accountability, self-study research offers teachers a conduit to document their teaching according to the professional accountability they set for themselves as teachers, in general and/or specific to their subject and grade level.

Self-study scholars argue that accountability begins with the self. Lighthall (2004) presents a powerful argument for professional accountability and writes:

Humans do not like to be forced. They resist whenever and wherever the force comes from those who take little account of the local complexities, local values, local resources, local situation, denying or ignoring the realities that make up the situation in which any and all improvements will or will not take place, the

situation of this teacher, this student, this set of resources, in this school, with this administration, these students, and this community. The s-step enterprise stands in stark contrast to imposed forms of accountability, starting as it does with individuals who are intent on improving their own actions and practices, and who have empirical methods to further that commitment. (p. 233)

Self-study of teaching practices begins to build the muscle for professional development as a lifelong process. It reminds us that some of the hardest and most important work is working on oneself. Self-study can build teacher efficacy by encouraging teachers to be agents of their own learning and reform initiatives while collaborating with professional colleagues to improve their daily and long-term work with students (Samaras & Freese, 2006). As professionals, teachers learn to recognize the abilities they have to question, reflect, and take action in practice. Consequently, teachers gain self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities to promote students' learning through self-study research.

What teachers discover is that their greatest contributions to the educational system begin with their questions. When teachers across the United States and around the world each have the opportunity to ask their questions and assess their own practice, the impact for students is multiplied. Teachers need a means to be motivated to assess their practice, and that process must include outside interpretations (i.e., self-study teacher research). Teachers and schools will benefit when teachers ask their own questions about their own practice. Self-study research lays the groundwork for teachers' better-informed educational actions and decisions. Those individual and collaborative efforts in investigating pedagogy will have far-reaching implications for school change within and across schools.



1.2 Advice From a Self-Study Scholar

Personal Professional Accountability

In many instances, the catalyst for self-study is similar to a problem in relation to reflective practice. Being confronted by a problem (curious or puzzling situation) can cause one to stop and look again at taken-for-granted aspects of practice. Jack Whitehead (1989) described this as being a living contradiction, and in terms of personal professional accountability, it seems to me that a central issue for self-study is being sensitive to, or actively seeking to find, instances of being a living contradiction in our teaching. As Tom Russell (e.g., Russell, 2002) has highlighted many times, the way we teach has much more influence than what we say. Therefore, if we are to genuinely be scholars of teaching, we need to be able to demonstrate that we learn through the challenges created by our own actions in our practice. In that way, self-study is an important touchstone to personal professional accountability.

John Loughran
Monash University, Australia

What's in It for You?

Self-study research offers teachers like you the professional tools to study their classroom strategies and actions for change *and* also who they are as teachers. Teacher research is clearly related to teacher instruction. You are researching your instruction to improve students' learning. The pedagogies and strategies you plan, enact, and assess move you toward that improvement. The process of self-study research offers you an opportunity to ask what difference you make in your students' learning. As a teacher, you have a professional and ethical commitment to help students learn. Your peers are essential in that process of your personal professional accountability. They serve to support your efforts and can challenge your assumptions and interpretations. Self-study research is an excellent forum for demonstrating the value of peer review and the impact of working with colleagues. Learning to pose questions, search for your own answers, and be agents of your own learning in collaboration with critical friends will provide you with systematic collegial support for accountability in your practice. You might ask:

"What am I curious or puzzled about in my teaching?"

"How can I be a researcher of my teaching in order to impact my students' learning and my professional development?"

"Does my actual teaching align with my teaching philosophy?"

"What role does my culture play in my theories about teaching and learning?"

"How can I work collaboratively with colleagues to frame my study, to validate my findings, to improve my practice, and to make a difference in my students' learning?"

"How can I help develop a network of professional support with other self-study teachers?"

"How will my self-study research contribute to the knowledge base about teaching and learning?"

Perhaps you are both teacher and school leader. Self-study scholarship is not limited to teachers. A high school English teacher and department chair posed questions related to her professional accountability:

Does my role as the mother of a special education student help or hinder my ability to help colleagues? What traits do I have the most trouble balancing? Do my colleagues hold the same perception of these roles as problems or benefits? How do my colleagues view the role of department chair? Which hats, such as liaison, mentor, diplomat, or advocate, make the most difference to my colleagues? Finally, are/were these concerns for other department chairs as well? (Samaras et al., 2007, p. 476)

Examining what works and what does not work in your teaching plays a significant role in defining yourself as a teacher and learner (i.e., your teacher identity). As a teacher and

school leader, you can make a commitment to change yourself instead of feeling you must respond to another new educational fad. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) note the importance of cultural proficiency—of being aware of your own culture and values and their effect on your practice and your interactions with others. Looking inward introspectively is an essential step to looking outward so that your actions are not just something to do but something to reflect deeply about and to examine. Change begins from the inside out. That professional work begins and belongs with you. When you are encouraged to pose questions about your own practice, you collect convincing evidence of the realities of your classroom and the possibilities for change. You come to recognize that learning is a continuous process for yourself and your students.

2. Applicability

Self-study brings the envisioning process for educational reform beyond the rhetoric to a reality where teachers work to study and apply their reframed knowing directly to their own teaching practices. Loughran (2007b) asserts that “one immediate value of self-study is in the way it can inform and almost immediately influence practice” (p. xv). The simple truth is that students are interested in self-study research because by doing self-study, they recognize that it is valuable and useful to their practice. Teachers deserve research that is practical and directly applicable to their classrooms and educational reform efforts.

Self-study research has proven quite useful to teacher educators and students as they seek to improve their practice and enhance their personal, professional, and program development (Kosnik, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2006). Collaboration is becoming more common in teacher education programs and in schools where teachers are assigned to teacher teams by grade or discipline. Schools are increasingly working to build learning communities of practice through grassroots efforts and ones that are sustained over time. That groundwork is rooted in the direct work of teachers working with a critical friend to deliberate the dilemmas of teaching practice collectively and with mutual benefit. Schools will profit from the applications of critical friend inquiries as teachers begin to experience the sense of agency that comes through collegial teamwork, review, and a shared recognition of the complexities of teaching.

What’s in It for You?

Self-study research can contribute to your professional development because it allows you to apply changes that you believe in. As a teacher, you have the right to ask your own questions, particularly for school reform efforts toward making informed educational decisions and actions. Valli and Buese (2007) found that “teachers are motivated to enact changes they believe in” (p. 553). Accordingly, teachers are more likely to reject changes that are not part of their personal knowledge.

You are encouraged to build a sustainable learning community that is generated directly from your classroom needs and personal motivation instead of “top down” initiatives. As Cuban (1993) has noted, “The knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that teachers have, then, shape what they choose to do in their classroom and explain the core of instructional practices that have endured over time” (p. 256).

3. Reforming in the First Person With Critical Friends

Successful reform efforts are grounded in the work of participants (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2008), and in this case, those participants are teachers. Teachers can, and will, benefit from challenging the doubts they have and constructing new understandings about their practice instead of being receivers of knowledge constructed by others. Teachers benefit when they understand themselves and their teaching as shaped by the social, cultural, and political influences in their lives and when they recognize how they have shaped and can shape education. Teachers need opportunities “to think critically and challenge ideas of how power and control are constructed in the world and mapped onto them” (Schulte, 2002, p. 101). Reforming in the first person with critical collaborative inquiry allows teachers to develop and direct their professional development in learning communities that support and extend that development (Samaras, Freese, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008). Teachers must see themselves as learners and be given opportunities to work together as they engage in meaningful discussions about reform related to student learning (Hinde, 2003). Teachers should be encouraged to be clinical researchers in the laboratory of their own classrooms.

Lighthall (2004), in his meta-analysis of self-study research, declares, “It is no accident that reform is one of s-step’s major features” (p. 224). Teaching is, after all, a political act. Self-study teacher educators have been committed to modeling what they believe. They embrace teaching “not just as a pedagogical task, but also a ‘social-pedagogical task’” (LaBoskey, 2004a, p. 830) with moral, ethical, and political aims. They have studied their role in working for social justice in their teaching and teacher education programs (Brown, 2004; Griffiths, 2002; Hamilton, 2002; LaBoskey, 2009; Schulte, 2004). Self-study allows teachers to begin the reforming process by examining their own classrooms, programs, and institutions. They work to authenticate their practice through the explorations. Often the questions they raise are ones that challenge their own ways of doing things. In turn that questioning is set within a larger context of needed change in other classrooms.

Broadly, self-study comes under the conceptual umbrella of practitioner-based research, which has taken many forms (e.g., the teacher-as-researcher movement, reflective practitioner research, action research, narrative inquiry, and praxis inquiry) (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004). Practitioner research is “a promising line of research [that] involves questions related to pedagogical approaches designed to help people learn from their own practice” (Grossman, 2005, p. 452). Unlike other forms of practitioner-based research, self-study teacher researchers study their role within the research as they inquire within themselves to ask the taken-for-granted questions about their practice. The research is not only about their practice but researched from the first person instead of an onlooker. They are the change they seek in their field. Considering the tasks of teaching and schooling, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1996) argue that in “every classroom where teachers are learners and all learners are teachers, there is a radical, but quiet, kind of school reform in process” (p. 110).

Addressing action research as a form of practitioner research related to self-study, McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (2003) claim that action research “place[s] the ‘I’ at the centre of enquiry processes . . . as a form of self-study or first-person enquiry” (p. 9). They eloquently articulate their position in supporting such social research that fits the “I” in the research of action and influence:

The emphasis on the living person “I” shows how individuals can take responsibility for improving and sustaining themselves, and the world they are in. “I” have the capacity to influence the process of social change in this way, because “I” can influence others in my immediate context, who in turn can influence others in their contexts. The circles of influence are potentially without limit. Collectively, individuals can generate world-wide change. (p. 20)

The field of self-study has grown dramatically and distinctively from other forms of practitioner research in the past decades. Educators are eager to better understand what self-study is and what value it holds for education. A major goal in writing this textbook was a way to bring the value of self-study as a conduit for educational reform directly to you as teachers. Your research is the most powerful thrust for this work.

What’s in It for You?

The work you do to improve learning is an improvement for social justice as your efforts are to improve learning for all children (LaBoskey, 2004a). That important work is accomplished with the support and critique of your colleagues. In that regard, you are an educational reformer, reforming in the first person and with others. Bodone, Guðjónsdóttir, and Dalmau (2004) clearly explain the collaborative nature and reform in self-study research:

Self-study research is situated within the discourses of the social construction of knowledge, reflective practice and action for social change. The strong presence of collaboration in the practice of self-study of teacher education is a natural response to this ethical and theoretical location. (p. 742)

Self-study is individual and communal. Essential to your self-study is the collective work you will do with critical friends with mutual and communal benefits in receiving multiple levels of dialogue and points of view. You are constantly prompted to reach away from your way of knowing.

We will return to these three *whys* of self-study again as we come full circle at the end of the textbook. In the meantime, keep them in mind as you learn about self-study teacher research throughout this book. Begin to ask yourself, “How do I hold myself accountable to my students?” “What is the value in applying self-study in my practice?” “In what ways might I reform in the first person to impact student learning?”



KEY IDEAS

- Self-study begins with your wonderments about your practice.
- Self-study can be defined through the Five Foci, a definitional framework of self-study methodological components.

- Self-study research is:
 1. Personal situated inquiry
 2. Critical collaborative inquiry
 3. Improved learning
 4. A transparent and systematic research process
 5. Knowledge generation and presentation
 - Self-study research is not:
 1. About you studying others' personal inquiries
 2. Just about you
 3. Conducted alone
 4. Merely reflection
 5. Only about personal knowledge
 - Three *whys* of self-study research were presented in this chapter:
 1. Personal professional development
 2. Applicability
 3. Reforming in the first person with critical friends
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