

## Paper Number: 187

### Title: Self-Study as a means of understanding and embracing the complexities of (re)learning as a teacher educator

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#### Abstract

Self-Study of teacher education practices challenges educators to systematically and rigorously monitor practice, to collaborate in this learning and to critically scrutinise such learnings within the educational community. This paper explores the impact of Self-Study on the development of teacher educator 'knowing'. In exploring the complexities of (re)learning as a teacher educator, the following questions will be addressed: "Why self-study?"; "Which incidents?"; and, "What practices have contributed to the development of my 'knowing' as a teacher educator?" Two 'moments de provocateur' will be presented from a longitudinal study, which will be represented as 'critical interactions', and these interactions will be explored using a 'multiple perceptions task'. The results of this exploration will be presented not only as events that have shaped and reshaped my understanding of what it means to be a teacher educator, but as offering new and creative future possibilities for practice.

#### Introduction

This paper examines the impact of Self-Study on the development of teacher educator 'knowing': a 'knowing' that has been largely enhanced by the implementation of a reflective format which encourages the identification and acknowledgement of multiple perceptions related to 'critical interactions' during teaching. As such, this paper will be organised within a framework that addresses four aspects which are integral to the understanding of this study. Initially, I present a discussion relating to the key concepts addressed within the research, particularly 'perception', 'critical interactions' and self-study refer to how these have been conceptualised within this study. This is followed by a description of the context, which includes the learning framework and an explanation of the method. The outcomes of the study are discussed as are the limitations and implications for the teacher education community. A key concept which is integral to this study is that of *perception*. Perception has been defined as "an interpretation or impression based on one's understanding of something" (Oxford Dictionary, 1998, p. 606). The *Multiple Perceptions Task* was focussed on eliciting points of view and individual interpretations so as to enrich the understanding of an interaction. Perception was important throughout the study, as identifying these perceptions allowed for the challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions (see Brandenburg, 2004). *Critical interactions* are referred to throughout this paper and became integral to learning about the learning. Much has been written about critical incidents (Tripp, 1993; Mitchell, 2002); teachable moments (van Manen, 1991; Loughran, 2002); critical incidents/events (Woods, 1993). Little research is available relating to *critical interactions* but this concept draws heavily on the above research. The conceptualisation of critical incidents within this learning context, defines characteristics of what these interactions consist of: an interaction, usually verbal, which is regarded by participants as critical and leads to some type of reflective practice. The interaction commonly invokes an engaged response.

## **Moving towards reform in Teacher Education- Why Self-Study?**

Given the ongoing, (and often critical) debate on the relevance and effectiveness of teacher education programs, it has become even more important for teacher educators to assess, and often, reframe their roles as educators. Calls for teachers to reflect on practice are not new. Stenhouse (1975), called for teachers to “take a research stance to their own teaching ... [to develop] a disposition to examine one’s own practice critically and systematically ... [so as to] understand better his own classroom” (pp. 156-7). He goes on to state a key premise, upon which self-study now is based: “theory is simply a systematic structuring of his understanding of his work ... and the theory should be rich enough to throw up new and profitable questions” (p. 157). The Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) has, according to Loughran (2004), “become an empowering way of examining and learning about practice while simultaneously developing opportunities for exploring scholarship in, and through, teaching” (p. 7). Despite its relatively recent emergence as an approach to research practice, self-study has impacted and continues to influence the professional practice and developing pedagogy of teacher educators. The Self-Study movement developed in the early 1990s and was referred to by Zeichner in his AERA 1998 Division K Vice-Presidential address as: “probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research” (1999, p. 8). The initial concept, developed by the Self-Study Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 1992 was established as a result of educators’ desires to question practices and beliefs about practice in a systematic and rigorous manner with the aim of enhancing learning outcomes for all. Self-study is an approach to research that enables teacher educators and other professionals to reflect on, and scrutinise practice and assumptions about learning so as to improve and to challenge the status-quo: transformation and deeper understandings of the ‘why’ of practice are developed (Feldman, 2002). However, the nature of self-study research remains complex and “open to individual interpretation” (Schuck, 2002, p.327).

### **Characteristics of Self-Study**

Self-study scholars have addressed the characteristics which are evident in self-studies as markers of this research paradigm. Guilfoyle, Hamilton, Pinnegar & Placier (2004) suggest that there are “four characteristics of self-study research, and these include: human interaction; the understanding that the ‘researcher and researched are temporal, indeterminate and changing’; an understanding that there is an obligation to discover all that can be known about the students’/researchers’ context, background, goals, social relationships, purposes and learning; and finally the belief that ‘humans have an impact on each other and the content and processes in which they are engaged’” (p. 1112). Loughran suggests, “there is a range of factors that influence how a self-study might be conducted and communicated” (2004, p. 17). As an example he cites Loughran and Northfield where characteristics as referred to as ‘features’ which ‘portray’ self-study (See Loughran & Northfield, 1998). La Boskey (2004) provides five characteristics associated with self-study:

- it is initiated by and focused on self;
- it is improvement- aimed;
- it is interactive at one or more stages throughout the process;
- utilizes multiple, mainly qualitative methods of data collection, analysis and representation; and,

- it conceptualises validity as validation thus endeavouring to advance the field through the construction, testing, sharing and re-testing of exemplars of teaching practice.(p. 175)

Many researchers refer to the collaborative nature of self-study (Loughran, 2004; Loughran & Northfield, 1996; Schuck, 2002) and state that for self-studies to maintain credibility, validity (Feldman, 2003) and trustworthiness, involvement of 'others' is imperative. 'Others' include those involved in the formulation and implementation of the study and those that assist in the verification and the ongoing data interpretation. La Boskey (2004) suggests that "interaction takes many forms, and collaboration is one aspect of this interaction" (p. 848). Feldman, Paugh and Mills (2004) suggest that self-study methodology would incorporate the following methodological features:

- A self-study would bring to the forefront the importance of self,
- it would make the experience of teacher educators a resource for research, and
- it would urge those who engage in self-study to be critical of themselves and their roles as researchers and teacher educators (p. 959).

In essence, Self-study, as a form of teacher (educator) research, seeks to recognise the value of experience and reflection as contributors to the knowledge base of educators, which in turn, contributes to 'ways of knowing'. These 'ways of knowing' develop over time and are the result of often "messy and non-linear" pathways (Mitchell, 2002, p. 252), which have influenced the understandings associated with learning more about the learning, in contrast to an emphasis on the practice of teaching.

Increased understanding of teacher education conducted within the context of teacher education, by teacher educators is a distinguishing feature of self-study.

### **Teacher Education at the University of Ballarat**

As many researchers have acknowledged, there is no 'script' for teacher educators in the course of developing teaching and learning practice and understandings about that learning. As Mueller (2003) suggests: "no specific training exists for teacher educators" (p. 68) and integral to my learning was the coordination of the new Bachelor of Education Course (Prep-6; Prep-10) introduced in 2001. The structure encouraged Pre-service teacher choice in determining learning pathways and offered a selection of specialisations. It aimed at assisting individuals to become *critically reflective practitioners* prepared for the *new knowledge economy* (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001) and the challenges of lifelong learning. As a result of this restructure, Pre-service teachers, throughout the four years of the course, experienced strategic *commuting* (teaching in schools/reflection at university), and it was anticipated that this approach would assist participants in becoming not only technically and practically competent practitioners, but practitioners capable of critical appraisal and assessment of ethical, social and moral issues linked to the pedagogy of teaching and learning.

Some key questions began to emerge for me in terms of teaching and learning: Who owned the learning?; Were the students truly constructing knowledge or was I presenting a course where students were required to participate in pre-planned learning experiences, revolving around the understanding of mathematical content and teaching procedures and practicalities?; I espoused constructivist theory but was I modelling a contradiction? One critical comment, written by a Pre-service teacher in May 2002, was 'practice what you preach'.

It was the implementation of this new program that provided opportunities for me to redevelop units and approaches to teaching and learning that more clearly represented the way I aimed to teach. The characteristics of the new approach included negotiation; the introduction of buddy teaching; of systematic reflective practice as a means of unpacking the learning using the ALACT cycle (Korthagen et al, 2001) and the creation of *roundtable sessions* as a structured space for reflection. The underlying assumptions linked to this roundtable approach to learning were based on the following beliefs:

- roundtable reflection would provide opportunities for pre-service teachers/teacher educator to 'make sense' of experience/s in a supportive environment;
- pre-service teachers would generate the discussion by raising issues related to experience;
- the role of the teacher educator would be to introduce the session, clarify the framework and consciously refrain from leading and/or dominating discussion;
- all pre-service teachers would be provided with an opportunity to raise an issue and thereby voice;
- the learning outcomes could not be predetermined;
- learning/s would be made explicit;
- opinions would be respected; and,
- references would be made to the ALACT model of reflective practice (Inner/outer cycle).

This paper explores the complexities associated with understanding the pedagogy of teacher education. It considers what it might mean when we reflect systematically on experience to create new meaning; interrupt a traditional teacher education culture, and experience uncomfortable learning zones; understand more about why we are who we are, and when we learn more about the *coming to know* as a teacher educator.

### **Self-Study Methodology**

My self-study has been a longitudinal study conducted over three years (2002-2004) with cohorts of Pre-service teachers completing the Bachelor of Education (P-6; P-10). The methods employed as a means of gathering the data reported about in this paper were largely qualitative and involved: systematic audio-taping and transcription of roundtable sessions; written Pre-service teacher evaluations; teacher educator journal entries; records of conversations; and, personal emails and the completion of 'multiple perceptions tasks'. Each sample group/individual, reported in this study was part of a larger cohort of Bachelor of Education Pre-service teachers. All pre-service teachers names referred to within this study are pseudonyms.

The multiple perceptions task, as an approach to collecting data, was developed as a means of eliciting multiple interpretations about a critical interaction and involved the unpacking of the interaction, as either lines from the transcript or individual responses to anecdotal notes from the session. Post-session, the transcript/notes were transcribed/tabulated and then provided to each (invited) participant to complete individually. These responses were then tabulated and evaluated.

The data from the two interactions were then analysed for emergent themes.

### **Two Critical Interactions**

The data analysis offered in this paper is based on two interactions extracted from the study which seek to exemplify some key learning moments; moments that became precursors for new understandings, insights and *knowing*, and altered practices as a teacher educator. They have been identified as critical as each one has become a turning point in my understanding of practice, and developing pedagogy about learning about the learning. Each interaction has resulted in new ways of knowing and



understanding about the learning (Feldman, 2002) so in essence, there has been a transformation associated with understanding and practice. The two interactions could briefly be described in the following way

Research Study, Year One, Week 2 - Chelsea, a third year Pre-service teacher, following a week of negotiation relating to the Unit "Learning and Teaching Mathematics" responds to my invitation to discuss these negotiations with the cohort of 92 Pre-service teachers. She addresses her peers and challenges that which has been negotiated. What does negotiation mean in the realities of practice?

Research Study, Year Two, Week 4 – Sam responds to my question posed during the roundtable session referring to my role as teacher educator- he states "annoying". What does Sam mean by "annoying"?

The context and the data excerpts relating to each of the above incidents is as follows.

### **Interaction One: Chelsea**

Chelsea was a Third year Bachelor of Education Pre-service teacher, attending the second forum session of the Learning and Teaching Mathematics II unit, in July, 2002. As a cohort, the previous week had revolved around negotiating the mathematics unit - the content, the processes, the assessment tasks. Following some teacher led discussion, the Pre-service teachers were asked if there were any further questions. Chelsea raised her hand, and rose to her feet to address the group of ninety-two Pre-service teachers, challenging the outcomes. An excerpt of her reflection is as follows:

I was not very knowledgeable in the area of authentic negotiation. I expected that it would give me a sense of power and ownership over my learning, as I would have input. Although I am an assertive person, I was also apprehensive about challenging Robyn, the unit coordinator, on this... no one commented. I reluctantly stood up and said "so everyone is happy with this task?" No one answered... "Doesn't anyone think that there are too many articles to have to read and write about?... There was silence. I was appreciative that Robyn was silent, allowing me to have my say and give other students some time to speak. I felt rather embarrassed and uncomfortable... The negotiated alterations were pleasing because I had participated in what I believed to be a team approach to making beneficial changes for all concerned. I felt proud of myself for having the courage to be actively involved. I felt positive about having the opportunity in a non threatening environment to express myself, knowing that 'the boss' would not in turn display negative behaviour or attitude toward me. My expectations of negotiating the unit were met. I questioned why these people did not speak up. I came to the conclusion that negotiating the curriculum was new to a lot of us and that it is at times difficult to alter the way we think. Challenging or negotiating with people in positions of power can be daunting in many institutions, not just in universities. I personally believe that primary and secondary schools, along with universities are not conducting enough authentic negotiation with students and hope that more students in the future are empowered through this process as I was. (Chelsea, Bachelor of Education student, Written post-session reflection following Forum Session 2, July, 2002)

### **Incident Two: Sam**

Sam was a mature age First year Bachelor of Education Pre-service teacher. During Roundtable – I asked the following question: "how do you see my role; how do you see me?" The following is a transcript of an excerpt of this session. Four months later Mary and Sophie were invited to complete the Multiple Perceptions Task.

**Table 2: Multiple Perceptions Task**

	Transcript	Robyn	Mary	Sophie
R11.033 Robyn	Okay now I'll ask you a question about my role. Now I know this is fairly new to you people you're saying you don't have anything like this in other units, how do you see my role; how do you see me?	Taking a risk with the open invitation to express opinion; anticipating a comparison with past experience; clarification of my role (the anticipated and the actual- are there contradictions in my modelling, delivery, practices?) Felt I had established a trusting, supportive learning environment	My thoughts at this stage were: Does she really want to know the answer to this? Shall I say what I think or just what I think she wants to hear.	
R11.034 Sam	Annoying. Only because you are too sensitive to it on the flip side- well I reckon  (Gasp, laughter from the group)	The word 'annoying'- what did he mean by annoying? Was I annoying him or was the process annoying him and why? Shock laughter from the group. I am surprised. This was an instantaneous response.	Well at least he is truthful but it takes courage to really say what you think no matter how much the tutor or lecturer tells you so. I am amazed that he talks so.	<i>My thoughts – Bloody hell Sam, that's a bit confronting. I wonder how she will handle it.</i>

## Discussion

Much has been written about the impact of critical incidents in learning (Tripp, 1993; Mitchell, 2002). Much has also been reported about the lack of objectivity, the distortions that may be created, and the inherent lack of reliability and validity when employing the use of critical incidents as a data source. However, it has been the experience of these critical interactions which have impacted so intensely on my developing pedagogy. It is precisely the affective connection or the emotional response that is associated with each of the interactions that created the challenge for needing to understand practice, and the influence of practices, within this learning and teaching environment. Responding to these interactions has resulted in 'knowing' more about the learning. It must be noted that common to each critical interaction, for each participant in this learning process, was the affective or emotional engagement.

All respondents refer to feelings. As Chelsea stated: *“Although I am an assertive person, I was also apprehensive about challenging Robyn; I felt rather embarrassed and uncomfortable”*; *“I felt proud of myself for having the courage to be actively involved. I felt positive about having the opportunity in a non threatening environment to express myself ...”* Similarly, Sophie mentioned that: *“Sam was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable now”* and she then moves on to say that *“Asking us to reflect on whether we were fine with this I found annoying.”* Clearly, this approach to learning can create a degree of discomfort or anxiety and the teacher educator must not only be sensitive to this but provide support and encouragement.

### **An Interruption**

Inherent in this process is a risk-taking approach to learning, which then may promote a sense, and experience of, vulnerability as a learner (Loughran & Berry, 2002). The interaction with Chelsea represented an example of what it means to interrupt a traditional teacher educator culture, to experience the tentativeness associated with the unknown and to recognise, *in situ* and in retrospect, how courage combined with an orientation to *know more* can create learning opportunities for all. One must maintain a balance between exposing one’s own vulnerability (as a Pre-service teacher and as teacher educator); allowing for the unexpected; responding with judgement; and, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions. It was within this learning context that our roles as learners were being reframed. Likewise, the Sam’s response, “annoying”, became a catalyst. During the roundtable session, and on reflection, this comment interrupted what I would most likely by habitual ways of operating for a number of participants. Comments by members of the group suggest that there were obviously intense levels of discomfort for some and as Sophie stated: *“My thoughts – Bloody hell Sam, that’s a bit confronting. I wonder how she will handle it?”* and, *“People were feeling nervous. I think the laughter was out of nervousness”*. Learning about learning can be uncomfortable. It is interesting to note that following each critical interaction both Pre-service teachers and the teacher educator responded, using *some form* of reflective practice. Although the ALACT framework (Korthagen, *et al*, 2001) provided the guidelines for the roundtable sessions, the approaches incorporated by participants were varied and ranged from a personal written Pre-service teacher reflection (Chelsea); teacher educator journal entry (Robyn); personal e-mail communication (Sam); and multiple perceptions task (Sophie, Mary, Robyn).

Sam, following his “annoying” comment clearly felt that he needed to explain, during the roundtable session, why he made this comment. The reaction from his peers reflects a certain type of surprise and this is supported by comments such as: “Would I do that? (R11.037, Roundtable 11, line 089)” and, “Dig a hole. Come on!” (R11.042). Perhaps he felt he had gone “beyond the boundaries” but what was interesting to note is that later in the session he stated that “It perhaps didn’t come out the way...” (R11.089). During the following week Sam emailed me to explain that he had not meant to offend he just wished to express his opinion about reflecting as part of the learning (My reflection to this critical interaction is explored more thoroughly in Brandenburg, 2004).

So, some common patterns begin to emerge from the data. The initial three points refer to both the Pre-service teachers and the teacher educator; the fourth, that of *transformed practice* relates to the teacher educator.

- An initial identification of a ‘critical interaction’ by those involved in that interaction
- Emotional engagement, referred to as ‘feelings’

- Reflection on that ‘interaction’ which may be represented in a variety of formats (journal entry, written evaluations, ‘multiple perceptions task’, email communication)
- Transformed practice

### Knowing more as a Teacher Educator

The data does not provide evidence as to any transformations associated with learning about the learning by way of a future orientation, for the pre-service teachers. It can be stated that the critical interaction did have some impact on them as learners, learning about learning, however, one could only make assumptions about how this experience may have impacted future practice and developing pedagogy.

However, as a teacher educator, and participant in this process, these critical interactions have become key moments that have influenced my pedagogical understanding which has impacted not only my practices, but my disposition, orientation and expectations associated with teaching, learning and learning about learning. It has also created an impetus for exploration of further possibilities.

I have come to see that perceptions matter. By focusing on perceptions I realise that the lens we attach to learning is as individual as the learner. This is not a new insight but through this self-study, it is now “real for me”. Although I felt that I considered, encouraged and supported learning, beliefs and approaches to teaching and learning in multiple ways, perhaps this was not always the case. It was the “challenging” to my way of being a teacher educator (Feldman *et al.*, 2004) where I had to learn to accommodate this multiplicity and in many ways modify my orientation and expectations, which prompted altered actions. For example, learning how to remain silent, or at least, less vocal, provides opportunities for other orientations and perceptions to be voiced. This is not always easy, as years of conditioning within a traditional teaching paradigm tends to set the foundations for how one is “expected” to teach: this usually takes the form of speaking, telling and sharing.

What I am asking of pre-service teachers is challenging. I have been involved in teaching/teacher education for many years and this realisation should not be so new or enlightening, but it is. I am requiring pre-service teachers to not only reflect, but to reflect on that reflection/incident using the multiple perceptions task, as an example. It is only until this experience is lived that the realities, (including the difficulties associated with moving and transforming perceptions) becomes obvious. We have ways of operating based largely on assumptions and practices which have developed through our cultural and experiential bases. For me, this realisation and acknowledgement is critical as is the identification of the critical interactions themselves, which may/may not lead to further learning. In this way, however, the status-quo of teacher education practices is challenged and creative possibilities for future transformations in terms of understanding multiple perspectives and practice becomes a real possibility.

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