

# SELF-STUDY IN ACTION RESEARCH: TWO TEACHER EDUCATORS REVIEW THEIR PROJECT AND PRACTICE

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## **Abstract**

This is the final paper in a four-part series by two pre-service teacher educators. The authors define self-study of teacher education practices and outline their research methodology. They then draw on excerpts from their written reflections to examine how self-study of teacher education practices can enhance the reflective dimension of action research.

## **Introduction**

From its beginnings, action research has been influenced by both Dewey's idea of inquiry and the Thorndike's scientific study of education (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). While there are many different models of action research, most action research involves identifying an issue, collecting baseline data, implementing a plan, and documenting and reflecting on our present actions in order to revise our future actions. In order to make sense of their research and improve their practice, most action researchers have engaged in some reflection. Still, it was only with the move to emancipatory action research (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; 2000) that self-reflective inquiry was made explicit by a group of action researchers.

A shared commitment to improving practice led us to develop a two-tiered action research project involving our pre-service teacher education class. Dianne, who positioned her classroom research within the emancipatory tradition of action research, regarded her work as both active and reflective in nature. Julian regarded his action research as a high school teacher in a similar way, but now, as a pre-service instructor, his main interest was the self-study of his teacher education practice. As a result, we focused self-consciously on reflection in our methodology and interpretations. By examining how self-study has informed this inquiry, we hope to illustrate that the linking of action research and self-study of teacher education practices can result in research that is rich both in field data and reflection on practice.

## **Methodology**

Self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) is a methodology characterized by examination of the role of the self in the research project and "the space between self and the practice engaged in" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). As Bullough & Pinnegar (2001) state, it is through written reflection and teacher conversations that we negotiated the tensions between ourselves and our contexts, between biography and history. While self-study research has "used various qualitative methodologies and has focused on a wide range of substantive issues" (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p. 305), the emphasis self-study places on reflection means it is highly compatible with action research. We believed combining action research with self-study would enrich our assessment of the two-tiered action research project; by examining our own reflections and conversations before, during and after the project, we would understand more deeply the complexities of teacher education.

Thus, in addition to identifying an issue, collecting baseline data, implementing a plan, documenting and reflecting on our present actions in order to revise our future actions, we decided to employ narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) such as journaling, writing reflections, examining letters and e-mails we wrote to our pre-service teachers, and

noting details of our conversations with each other, in order to engage in meaningful reflection on our roles as teacher educators. For the duration of our action research, we reflected on aspects of the project in our teacher education journals. At the end of the school year, both of us wrote retrospective reflections on our experiences as teacher educators developing and implementing action research with our students.

The action research methodology, which is developed more fully in Stevens and Kitchen, "Introducing Pre-service Teachers to Action Research" (see OAR, Volume 7.1), involves identifying an issue, collecting baseline data, implementing a plan, and documenting and reflecting on our present actions in order to revise our future actions.

### ***Lessons Learned from this Self-Study***

#### *Constructing a Growth-Oriented Environment*

Underlying Julian's approach to teacher education is a deep commitment to pre-service teachers, particularly to establishing an environment in which they feel safe to reflect on their practice and examine the complexities of classroom and learning. An excerpt from a letter he gives to his cohort on the first day of classes reveals his orientation to teacher education.

Classrooms are extremely complex and dynamic environments in which teachers, students, curriculum and milieu intersect. As teachers, you play the pivotal role in negotiating this complexity to ensure meaningful learning for your students ---

I have enormous respect for each of you and the unique qualities you bring to the teaching profession. My class will be a place in which your uniqueness will always be respected. I am committed to fostering a safe environment in which you can make meaning of your experiences and in which you can build strong bonds with your classmates. I am honoured to be working with you this year. I will do all I can to ensure that you have an enriching year!

While it is impossible to teach you how to teach in nine months, I think that we can provide you with useful knowledge and skills which, when combined with your rich set of experiences, will enable you to effectively begin a long and rewarding career! (Letter to Pre-service Students, Fall 2003)

To this point, Julian had utilized reflection on past experience and present practice, as well as critical analysis and additional field experience as the tools for professional growth of pre-service students. Now he planned to add inquiry through action research into their program. However, the process of moving pre-service teachers forward through action research held some challenges. Looking back, Dianne recalls two, in particular:

*Validating the Process:* For the most part, our pre-service teachers responded well to our action research challenge. In fact, many appeared excited by the prospect of choosing a project significant to themselves and having the liberty to design a course of action, but a number were dubious and a few questioned whether action research could really be considered "research". Was there a control group? How did the teacher generate statistics? How could action research be objective? Were the results valid if they weren't reproducible? I did my best to answer questions directly, but I know some doubts remain. (Reflections, July 2004)

*Offering Choice:* When I first stressed that each person was to choose a project of meaning to him or herself, I sensed some level of silent incredulity: an "Oh, yeah. Sure" attitude. At some point, at least some people thought they would be pointed in a direction. I told them a story about my daughter-in-law who attended a faculty of education just last year. Her action research project as a pre-service teacher grew into an enormous – and to her, meaningless – literacy project. When I asked her what she really wanted to

know in her teaching situation, she replied, "I needed to know how to walk into a classroom where I knew no one and find out where each student was in math before I began teaching." I replied, "That should have been your action research project." I sensed the story had some impact, and our students were closer to believing they really would have choice in this project. From my perspective, choice is critical if learning is to be meaningful, for adults or for children. (Reflection, July 2004)

#### *The Constraints of Context and Collaboration*

Immediately after introducing the action research project, Julian expressed some concerns in his teacher education journal.

I am mindful of the challenges of implementing a complex interdisciplinary project on a tight time schedule. As I am unsure of what we can reasonably expect from the student teachers, I cannot anticipate all their concerns or be sure I am guiding them in the right direction. I feel that I am not entirely in control of this project and am concerned that the uncertainty may increase the anxiety of students in a one-year B. Ed. program.

My sense that I lack control is compounded by the fact that this is a collaborative project. I am grateful that Dianne is very well versed in action research and that she has the expertise to guide students in their initial proposals. I am less certain about the interdisciplinary aspect of the project. While it was my idea to link the action research project in TES with their education psychology course, the instructor of that course is new to the B. Ed. program and her understanding of the project may differ from mine.

Overall, I am excited by this project but am concerned about the inevitable "implementation dip". I hope that the benefits will outweigh the initial anxieties for students. (Teacher Education Journal, September 15, 2003)

Dianne also experienced tension around collaboration. While she was given considerable autonomy in introducing action research and responding to student work, she was always conscious that this was Julian's course and that he was ultimately responsible and accountable. As well, Dianne noted later, "It isn't easy to co-ordinate three instructors, and this project will work better if we are all moving in the same direction" (Reflection, July 2004). We now recognize that we should have met more regularly in order to present the assignment with greater consistency and work out any problems together.

Protecting pre-service teachers from overwork and undue anxiety was one of Julian's central concerns. For those who integrated their action research project into their practice teaching sessions, the process went fairly well (they knew their placements in advance and were able to begin planning lessons). Still, delays in the first weeks of classes meant this approach was not a comfortable fit for some. Julian expressed this concern in the following entry:

Today I visited Josh at Northern SS. He was concerned about his AR project and was planning to adapt his spelling project to fit into his Chemistry class. While I was pleased with his willingness to do this, I was also feeling guilty that energy was being diverted away from his practicum duties. I have had similar conversations with other students. Thankfully none of them are at-risk in their practice teaching sessions. Next year we need to get off the mark sooner so this does not happen. (Teacher Education Journal, November 10, 2003)

At the end of the year, as he began redesigning the action research project, Julian again wrote of the need to alleviate this problem. While there was an "implementation dip", the process ran much more smoothly after the first day. Two weeks later, Julian felt more at ease, as the reflection below indicates:

I feel better today about the process. The students have lots of fascinating ideas for action research projects and Dianne addressed their concerns very nicely in class today. Timelines—due dates for proposals, time to respond and return responses, start of practice teaching session—are very tight and I worry they could be obstacles to completion of the projects or an added stress during the practicum. Joanne has shown great flexibility in adjusting her course to this project. She is checking students' literature research proposals, while Dianne is commenting on the proposals for the action part of this process. Joanne is so enthusiastic, I am standing back so that we do not send mixed messages; I am also standing back a little so that Dianne can take charge of this project in my class. (Teacher Education Journal, September 29, 2003)

#### *A Sense of Accomplishment*

While there were challenges along the way, the students' proposals and final submissions validated the optimism Julian expressed on September 29, 2003. The overall success of the projects is conveyed in Dianne's reflection below:

Our students' work makes me optimistic about teaching and education. They have done so well with the projects they undertook! They have managed to reach out to students in unexpected ways in their first session of practice teaching. This bodes well for the teachers they will be and for their future students. I am almost always thrilled with the learning that takes place when people – be they students or teachers – are given choice. (Reflection, July 2004)

Julian also noted important positives:

The pre-service teachers' enthusiasm for their action research projects seems to arise from the pleasant discovery that they could be more effective practitioners if they researched their own practice. Maureen, for example, enjoyed "working on the intersection between theory and practice" and credited this project with making her more "willing to experiment with different strategies". Indeed many of them felt empowered as professionals capable of bridged theory with practice, and able to use their judgement to adapt curriculum and instructional strategies to their students' needs and to the context. (Teacher Education Journal, September 22, 2004)

#### **Conclusions and Implications**

Self-study was vital to our growth because it heightened our level of reflection during the action research process. By consciously examining our teaching practice through action research and self-study, we were able to make adjustments to this assignment and the curriculum as a whole. By reflectively engaging in interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching, we enhanced our skills as co-instructors and renewed our commitment to working with other teacher educators. Self-study was a very important part of our process. By reflecting on both this project and our teacher education practice generally, we developed deeper understanding of our research findings, identified possibilities for action research in teacher education, and examined closely our beliefs and practices as teacher educators.

Action research is a robust and effective approach to enhancing education through practitioner research. Self-study of teacher education practices is a complementary research approach that can enhance the reflective dimension of action research. We anticipate that if other action researchers were to consider incorporating journaling and other forms of reflection into their research methodologies and data collection, they would experience greater understanding of themselves as practitioners.

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## Biographical Note:

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