# Weaving Self-Studies through Journaling

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Journaling is core to many self-study of teacher education practice (S-STEP) research projects. Its appeal lies in the freedom it allows the researcher to purposefully record and explore the experiences of being an embodied individual situated in practice.  Rather than being a way to simplify or reduce teaching to its core constituent elements, journaling offers a means for making sense of the self-in-practice in ways that embrace the uncertainty, non-linearity, and inevitable ‘messiness’ that is inherent in pedagogical settings. This suggests that its value as research method for S-STEP researchers is not just its ability to collect or generate data for later analysis, but also in the potential to be a tool for introspection, processing and deep, ongoing reflection. While this potential is coherent with S-STEP methodology, we note that there are few guidelines describing how journaling might be performed as a method for enacting S-STEP research or articles that define journaling as a research method (JARM). As Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) point out, despite its popularity and common use, it is only tacitly assumed that everyone knows what journaling means. Similarly, Lighthall (2004) suggests that there is a shared understanding by S-STEP researchers that all journals are essentially the same and that, “the only methods necessary are those we all, students and teachers, already possess by virtue of our ability to write anything” (p. 216).

The fact that such a key research method lacks clarity and guidelines sparked our interest. What does it mean to engage in journaling as a research method in the S-STEP methodology? Are there some tacit common protocols and guidelines? Should there be? Is there an expectation that researchers detail their method and discuss how issues of bias are managed? In this study we begin to tease out what journaling as a method means in the self-study community and how journaling is enacted as a research method (JARM). Specifically, this study explores the aim, frequency, nature, and purpose of using journaling as a research method for the S-STEP methodology in selected publications.

## Journaling as S-STEP Method

Self-study is a methodology that embraces multiple methods of research. While drawing heavily on traditional qualitative methods of data collection, self-study generally transforms those methods by taking them into a new context and using them in ways that often depart from the traditional. In other words, self-study is marked by flexibility and creativity in terms of its research methods and tools based on the desire to render the complexity of the ‘self-in-practice’ in a form that allows for analysis, reflection, and possible transformation. In a real sense, this means that there is no one set self-study method. Rather, methods are often chosen, created, adapted, and evolved depending on their ability to facilitate the inquiry (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Likewise, Loughran (2004) states, “There is no one way, or correct way, of doing self-study. Rather, the process and choice of methods how a self-study might be ‘done’ depends on what is sought to be better understood” (p. 15).

In their analysis of the methods and tools of self-study, Tidwell & Jónsdóttir (In Press) place journaling as one of the five most common methods reflecting narrative and text-based data/representation. The core characteristic of these methods being that they are intentional in the use of text (verbal, written, image) in terms of what and how data were gathered and analysed. Samaras (2011) mentions journaling when she discusses narrative as a data collection technique. She describes narratives as “Stories, journaling of your ongoing record, essays, other reflections about your study” (p. 175). We note that this is different from how she describes documenting “the self-study teacher researchers’ metaconversations to himself or herself and to critical friends of an unfolding of questions, reflections meaning making and shared insights” (p.175), which she refers to as a self-study teacher researcher log. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) define journals in a very broad sense as “writing with a purpose” (p. 124). Certainly, journaling has a long and rich history with respect to chronicling events and unpacking the flow of daily life. Journaling has been important to enriching our understanding of teaching in terms of both recording events and providing insights into people's thoughts, reactions, feelings and aspirations in relation to such events. Journaling is both a process and an artifact that helps capture the immediacy of practitioners’ lives through a process of intermingling description, commentary, introspection, and analysis in ways that enable deeper reflection and transformation.

While every self-study unfolds in a somewhat fluid and unpredictable manner, the self-study researcher needs to attend to issues of quality and trustworthiness. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) suggest that quality in self-study research is grounded in the trustworthiness and meaningfulness of the findings. They conclude that there is a need to respond to the burden of proof and state that, "Like other forms of research, self-study invites the reader in the research process by asking that interpretations be checked, that themes be critically scrutinized, and that the "so what" questions be vigorously pressed" (p.20). This directly points to the expectation that S-STEP researchers are transparent about their methods and address how they conducted the research with detail and justification. This need for transparency addresses directly the criterion outlined by LaBoskey (2004a) in respect to exemplar-based validation and the fact that in self-study, it is the reader who assesses the quality of the research, which itself requires that sufficient detail is provided to enable it to “ring true” to the reader.

## Method

The results presented below are grounded in two complementary datasets. In order to ensure we captured working examples of S-STEP we focussed our systematic review only on work published within the S-STEP community-initiated journal and conference publications, namely Studying Teacher Education and the Castle conference proceedings. In this way, we were assured that the studies not only represented examples of S-STEP research but that they had also been through a blind review process and judged worthy of publication by the S-STEP community itself (as acting editors or reviewers). We have not considered any articles that may be identified as self-studies but were presented or published outside of the target publications.

Our first data-set consisted of articles published in the first fourteen volumes (2005–2018) of Studying Teacher Education: A Journal of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices. It thus concerns self-study work written for journal publication and blind-reviewed using internal evaluation criteria. This data-set contained 242 articles that addressed self-study as an empirical research practice. A second data-set was generated from self-study works published in the conference proceedings of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) International Biennial Conference, also known as the Castle conference. This data source was composed of 12 conference proceedings consisting of some 1332 articles. Articles since the 5th Castle Conference in 2004 have been involved in a double round of blind peer review before acceptance into the proceedings (Garbett, Fitzgerald, Thomas, in press). A word count of 3,000 excluding references was imposed until 2014. In 2016, this limit was extended to 4,000 words but included references. We acknowledge that this restriction limits a fulsome description of the methods used. We used a random number generator to sample a chronological list of titles from the proceedings and produced a final data set for analysis from the Castle conferences comprising of 254 articles. When the two data sets were combined, we had a total number of 496 examples of S-STEP research to analyse.

The analysis consisted of three rounds of coding and recoding the journaling data in order to better understand the frequency, nature and aim of using journaling as a research method. The data was coded using Gibson and Brown’s (2009) method of thematic analysis. In the initial stage of analysis, we read through all the articles and identified those that used journaling or journal-like practices (such as diaries or written logs) as part of their method. Once identified, we noted how journaling was described and performed in the research. This round of analysis identified 315 of the 496 articles within the data set which used journaling or journal-like practices in their methodology. The second stage of analysis consisted of focussing on those papers that explicitly described journaling as their method (as opposed to those that may be journal-like) in order to develop a more complete picture of how journaling was being used as a research method. We identified 214 articles explicitly naming journaling as one of their methods. In this stage of the analysis we searched for commonalities, differences, and relationships between the themes that emerged.

We did two rounds of coding in order to let the themes more fully emerge and be understood. We decided to treat each variation or different use of journaling within an article as a separate case of journaling. This means that while there were 214 articles in the data set, there were 223 cases of journaling as research method that were analysed. Those 223 mentions of journaling have been coded to determine how, when, and why journaling is being used as a research method.

## Results

In our first read-through of the data set, we analysed the articles for any mention of journaling in the research methodology, data sources or data collection section of the articles. This was not as straightforward as we expected since there was often a lack of clarity or looseness about the use of term journaling as well as some practices not being explicitly labelled as journaling. For example, we were often unsure whether terms such as reflective writing or keeping notes should be categorised as journaling. In addition, we found that the term ‘journaling’ meant considerably different things for different authors. This apparent diversity meant that we had to exercise caution with respect to what actual practices we were labelling as journaling. We applied a fairly inclusive definition that a journal was a document produced for a broad range of reasons that could include descriptive notes and reflections. However, in applying this definition we found that the structure, consistency, and approach to journaling varied among users, which led to uncertainty as to whether the practices used were in fact journaling or more ‘journal-like’ in our view. To address this we coded the data in two ways. Firstly, starting with a broad definition, we found that journaling and journal-like practices were used in 63.5% of the studies analysed (i.e. 315 of the original 496). We included in this analysis all those studies whose research method was ‘journal-like’ but not explicitly identified as journaling. These included articles referring to the use of documents that we believed paralleled journals, including reflective writing, diaries, notes, field notes, written logs, etc. In the second read-through, we focussed only on articles that explicitly mentioned the use of ‘journaling’ or ‘keeping a journal’ within their method. Narrowing this down to focus only on those studies that were more explicit about their use of journaling lowered the number to 214 out of 496 or 43.1% of the articles in the data set. Table 1 presents the breakdown of this finding between the conference proceedings and journal articles.

**Table 1**

Frequency of Using Journaling as a S-STEP Research Method

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | CC Proceedings | STE Journals | Combined Total |
| Uses journaling/journal-like practice as a data source | 147/254  57.9% | 168/242  69.4% | 315/496  63.5% |
| Names journaling as a data source | 99/254  39% | 115/242  47.5% | 214/496  43.1% |

While journaling is a popular research method for S-STEP, an analysis revealed that very little detail was provided on how the method was actually carried out. Table 2 details what information was provided in the method sections. Despite other methods, such as narratives and observations, being quite well explained and referenced, we found that often there was very limited detail concerning any guidelines or protocols for journaling, and very few references to support the method. For example, Kaplan (2002) discusses two of his three primary sources of data but does no more than state that the third was personal journal writing.

I have relied on three primary sources for data – student writing, student evaluations, and personal journal writing. Collected works included student autobiographical pieces; student writing on personal observations of their own teaching and self-growth; reflective field notes and observations on my own teaching; and formal student evaluations of my own teaching. (p. 32-33)

We found descriptions of method were very limited in what information they included around the frequency of journaling, the quantity or length of journal entries, or the size of the final data set. For example, the most frequent length, mentioned in only 3.6% of the articles, was 0-4 pages. There were only two other instances of word count or time lengths being mentioned: one stated 12 entries totaling in all 14,000 words and the other example stated 10 minutes. The most common times for journaling were before or after meetings, sessions, classes, lessons, or workshops. In addition, there was limited detail or guidelines on what journal entries were written about. One third (33.2%) of articles did not state what constituted the content of a journal entry. Despite this, just over half (51.1%) outlined how journal writing was stimulated with 47.1% stating that they were guided by questions, prompts, or guidelines to some extent while the remaining 4% specified that journal entries were open ended.

We also thought that it was significant that almost 90% of studies did not provide a reference for journaling. Of the 23 references that were cited, few were specifically on journaling as a research method. In addition, only three references were cited more than once in our data set. These findings highlight an irregularity in referencing for JARM, which suggests that there is likely a lack of adequate resources/research around the topic. Research that contains clear, structured guidelines for JARM would help to better ensure that the journaling is produced with rigor and is, therefore, free from potential bias.

**Table 2**

How Much Detail was Provided about the Method of Journaling

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total | Percentage |
| Outlines what constitutes the content of the journal entries | 149/223 | 66.8% |
| Records quantity of journal entries | 22/223 | 10.3% |
| Outlines frequency of journal writing | 90/223 | 40.3% |
| Provides detail on length of entries or total size of data set | 10/223 | 8.9% |
| Outlines how journal writing was stimulated | 114/223 | 51.1% |
| Provides a reference for journaling | 24/223 | 11.2% |

Despite the lack of detail on how journaling was performed, it was evident that journaling was an attractive method to many of the researchers because of its flexibility. Within the data set that explicitly mentioned journaling as their method (n=223), we found that the stated purposes for journaling were varied and expansive. In all, we found 70 different purposes for journaling, which we reduced down to 15 categories. These are presented in Table 3 below. The three most common categories were: to contextualize/document teaching practice, experiences, decisions, and observations (14.3%); to document a/the process of their research or practice, document development, or document the implementation of a program (12.8%); and to analyze or reflect on experiences, reflect on learning, or reflect on a project (12.8%). To express, record, capture thoughts, feelings, reactions and beliefs was the only other category to be mentioned in more than 1 in 10 cases (11.4%).

**Table 3**

Purpose for Keeping a Journal

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | CC Proceedings | STE Journals | Combined Total |
| To contextualize/document teaching practice, experiences, decisions, observations | 4 | 6 | 10/70  14.3% |
| To document a/the process of their research or practice, document development, or document the implementation of a program | 2 | 7 | 9/70  12.8% |
| To uncover assumptions of practice, improve practice, improve behavior, monitor behavior | 0 | 3 | 3/70 |
| To help inform, reframe, or question other data sources or findings | 0 | 2 | 2/70 |
| To help construct a narrative | 0 | 2 | 2/70 |
| To give a more complete understanding of the researcher’s topic or findings, or triangulate data | 1 | 4 | 5/70 |
| To uncover intentions, capture perspectives, identify characteristics | 1 | 3 | 4/70 |
| To make informed decisions, gather information on practice, reframe thoughts or actions | 0 | 6 | 6/70 |
| Analyze or reflect on experiences, reflect on learning, reflect on project | 2 | 7 | 9/70  12.8% |
| Catalyst for critical friend discussion, document interchanges with critical friend | 0 | 2 | 2/70 |
| Understand a sub-culture | 0 | 1 | 1/70 |
| To express/record/capture thoughts, feelings, reactions, beliefs | 2 | 6 | 8/70  11.4% |
| To record developing ideas/views, record dialogue, reflect | 1 | 4 | 5/70 |
| Guide progress, monitor growth | 2 | 1 | 3/70 |
| Record events | 1 | 0 | 1/70 |

## Discussion

Journaling is a commonly used and flexible tool in S-STEP methodology. As we appreciated the extent of its usefulness we realized there were two important themes that ran through our analysis. The first is that there is very little common agreement between S-STEP researchers as to what constitutes the nature and practice of journaling. We identified that the very term “journaling” was used indiscriminately. For example, Tidwell (2002) uses journaling and notetaking interchangeably in her article. Magee (2010) on the other hand described using journaling and field notes as different forms in her article. Seaton (2006) refers to their journal as a field text but Jonsdottir & Gísladóttir (2016) refer to their field notes as something that exists within their journals. McAndrews (2000) explains that her journal existed within her portfolio. Spiteri (2010) describes her journaling “took the form of a daily diary (p. 135). Heston (2008) uses two journals in her article – a “reflective journal” (p. 173) and a “journal” (p. 174). We found it interesting that Heston thought that both journals were distinguishable enough from one another to call them, and use them for, separate things.

Another example of lack of agreement is the way some researchers talk of journaling as a process rather than as a product. For example, Ramirez and Allison-Roan (2014) make explicit that they envisage journaling “as asynchronous dialogue" (p. 174), while Strom et al. (2018) state, “After each meeting, we took time to journal and reflect on our dialogue and new ideas or insights that emerged from our collective conversation" (p. 145). Another example is provided by Conrad et al. (2010) who states, "The critical friends also noted their experiences during this process by journaling" (p. 147).

We are not suggesting that there is a problem with this diversity. Flexibility, and the ability to create and adapt research methods to suit the research problem and nuanced nature of educational practice is an essential feature of the S-STEP methodology. What we are highlighting is there appears to be no common principles or shared understanding of what journaling is as a method for S-STEP research. It appears to be a term that covers a broad range of practices, each with the rich potential to achieve many possible purposes. This seems to be supported by the cursory use of referencing and lack of consistent citations to journaling as a research method.

Secondly, and emerging from the theme above, there is a clear lack of detail and transparency that described how journaling was used as a research method. While flexibility can be incredibly generative, there is also a need to ensure that the research is sufficiently trustworthy (Tidwell, et al., 2009). As in all research, there is an expectation that the researcher clearly document the research design and data analysis process. As Silverman (2013) notes, documenting method involves, amongst other things, providing full descriptions in respect to what data has been studied, how it was obtained and how it was analysed. With respect to self-study, LaBoskey (2004b), states that trustworthiness can best be achieved by making the data visible and by clearly presenting and illustrating the “methods for transforming the data into findings, and the linkages between data, findings, and interpretations” (p. 1176).

The issue here is that there is a lack of clarity and consistency in describing how people use journaling as a research method. How entries become ‘data’, how this data is then analysed, and how bias is managed and mitigated are all grey areas. It is not clear methodologically whether journaling is the process of documenting things as they happen or if it is a record of internal metaconversations and reflections. Either way, as we have found in our analysis of the data, the reader is typically not privy to methodological decision-making around the process of journaling, particularly when that process becomes more than gathering or collecting data. We believe there needs to be more discussion and transparency around this topic. This is most important when journals go beyond personal recordings and their content shared and used as data. We wonder how does the desire to use journal entries as evidence to reinforce a particular stance or to highlight a change in perspective influence the way it is written in the journal? Does such an awareness influence how an entry is written if the anticipation is to use in a future publication? If we take journaling a step further to use it as a place to analyse our musings in an iterative way, are we getting further from or closer to anything of substance?

## Conclusions

Our analysis revealed three key findings. Firstly, the assumption that journaling is a commonly used research method in the self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) field is supported, although there is little consistency around what it actually looks like in practice. Secondly, journaling was rarely defined with adequate specificity or detail, even given the acknowledged word count limitations in the Castle articles. Overall, we found very little information was provided on the purpose of journaling, how each entry was triggered and recorded, what would count as an entry, how often and when journaling would be done, how long an entry was expected to be, and how the entries would be analysed or contribute to the analysis. Thirdly, journaling was a term used to cover a broad and growing range of practices. Overall, we found 70 purposes for journaling in the descriptions, which demonstrates that it is a very flexible tool. Such findings raise concerns around the rigour of self-study when journaling is used in such a diverse way with little clarity or transparency around its specific application. Our concern is that this lack of detail not only compromises the quality of the research produced, but may not sufficiently address the need for trustworthiness of S-STEP research.

We hope such findings will promote discussion on S-STEP methodology. We are continuing to analyse the works and to use examples from articles to illustrate that journaling has evolved to become something of a literary art form. Perhaps it is more accurate to write that journaling gives self-study researchers a sequestered space in which to wax lyrical. As Gustav Flaubert wrote in Madame Bovary, “Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars.” Perhaps that is true of our real intent when we say we have drawn on our journals for evidence.

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