

# An Ethic of Care and Shifting Self-Study Research

## Weaving the Past, Present, and Future

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This paper explores my developmental trajectory during and following my transition from *being* a teacher to *becoming* a teacher educator. I experienced an almost accidental entrance into the world of self-study research due to my involvement in a reflective teaching portfolio development process on commencement of my role as a teacher educator, in Ireland. This deepened my reflection on my teaching practice, so that I could better understand the well-documented challenges of *teaching how to teach* (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; Ritter, 2007; Hamilton, 2018). A colleague and mentor suggested that I consider self-study as a systematic way of capturing my reflections and new learning as a novice teacher educator, with support from an experienced critical friend (Feldman, 2003; Loughran & Russell, 2007). Since that first S-STEP experience, I have become increasingly involved with self-study research. Self-studies I have conducted or engaged with as a collaborative member have become more diverse in scope and have provided me with an enhanced understanding of the triad of *my-practice*, *my-self* and *me-with-others*. This *looking back to move forward* using retrospective analysis of varied textual artefacts (Manke & Allender, 2006) is a useful inquiry stance to facilitate a better understanding of the intricate, complex and evolving patterns and experiences within the ever-changing educational field of teacher education (Loughran et al., 2004; Loughran & Russell, 2007). In this

paper, I explore the idea of engaging my past selves as critical friend, to create a deepened understanding of my-*self* in practice, through the lens of my prior self-study research. In this way, I connect my learning from my past and present to explore new future imaginings for myself and in doing so, share relevant applied insights for other S-STEP colleagues.

## **Positionality**

My teaching spans thirty years across mainly second level and more recently third level education. While as a younger secondary school teacher of science/biology and physical education, I identified mostly as a practitioner operating within the academic spheres of my undergraduate subject disciplines. Since transitioning to teacher education, I think about myself as an educator in a broader sense, beyond my disciplinary domains. I currently teach science education modules to pre-service and postgraduate students, having transitioned to teacher education in August 2015. I have always tacitly pondered why I do what I do, in the way I do, and I have engaged with self-study over the last five years to capture and analyse elements of my practice in a structured and scholarly way. This work has been informed by more experienced S-STEP researchers studying the disciplinary tensions inherent in teaching how to teach science (see Berry, 2007; Bullock & Russell, 2012; Russell & Bullock, 1999).

In much of my initial S-STEP work, I focused on how to manage and balance students' needs and wants with my aspirations for them as pre-service teachers. I struggled with managing 'telling' with modeling inquiry approaches for use by students in the primary classroom (Berry, 2007). In my day-to-day teaching context, I meet 450 students rotating in smaller groups of 30, within a two-week period. I conduct the same tutorial eight to ten times in a fortnight, requiring me to differentiate carefully across and within groups. Importantly, I must deliver the last tutorial with the same energy,

enthusiasm and effectiveness as the first. When I teach, I try to maximise every opportunity for learning and assessment, alongside developing positive relationships with students. While I use a plethora of teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches, my considerations about my teaching and learning philosophy have broadened from *what and how I teach*, to thinking about how my teacher education practice relates deeply to *those I teach*.

## Theoretical Perspectives

This self-study is informed by Banks' (2004) *ethic of care*, which has guided my teaching philosophy for a long time. I *care for* the students and I *care about* their academic and pedagogical progress as pre-service teachers. I generate relational trust through care, as I believe this is supportive of educational and emotional growth among learners, and trust facilitates the development of a connected identity between a person's self and their learning. Banks (2004) calls for practitioners to provide a space for more egalitarian, less elitist relational opportunities for teachers and students, where teachers encompass a moral philosophy based on an ethic of care that enables learner and teacher to flourish. Rather than operate on the basis of an ethic of distrust (O'Neill, 2002) of students and where they are wary of us, my philosophy is to view the art of learning and teaching as an extension of ordinary morality (Koehn, 1994). I believe that when trust is present between teacher and learner, concerns with care and empathy are heightened (Benhabib, 1992). Noddings' (2005) work on *care* reaffirms the ethical and moral foundations of teaching. She sees ethical caring as a state of being and differentiates between caring for and caring about. Caring about can become a societal force because it creates ethical awareness within learners. In this paper, I interrogate how my self-study research to date has developed epistemologically and methodologically, while enacting a teaching philosophy based on an ethic of care for the learners I work with.

## Purpose

This self-study is unorthodox in that I inquire into my past and present self-studies *as data*, to inform my future teaching and research practice, and to interrogate the authenticity of my teaching philosophy in practice. Informed by Manke and Allender's (2006) concept of retrospective artefact analysis, in this self-study, I re-engage with notes, text, and written feedback from past students alongside personal reflection. In this way, as I contemplate the meta-data with the benefit of time and space, I engage my past selves as critical friends in order to facilitate an analysis of my evolving identity and positionality. While reflective and reflexive practice in teacher education is a key component of self-study (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015), I argue that reflecting on our self-study histories could form part of this continued investigation into both teaching and research practice. This maintains a focus on the *self* who teaches and researches (Kelchtermans, 2009). I believe our self-study histories have the potential to facilitate a continued deepened understanding (Loughran, 2004) of the multiplicity of roles inherent in teacher education *and* research. Schon's (1983) framing and reframing has been implicit in my prior self-study work with others because I find it more useful to view a *problem* from different perspectives. However, in this paper, I am *stepping back*, noted by Hamilton, (2002) as a central aspect of self-study, in order to re-understand my positionality in my role of teacher educator. I am using the concept of 'stepping back' in a number of ways. I am metaphorically stepping right back into my past self-studies to interact with data retrospectively and to reframe what I learned and acted on then, with a view to identifying new learning about the evolved *me in practice* now. I am also stepping back from orthodox self-study with another person acting as a critical friend, instead of engaging with my past selves to learn, review, and analyze my self-study work.

This study was self-initiated because I sensed a need in myself to stop,

to pause and to think. I found that I was increasingly looking for self-study research ideas, as if on a conveyor belt to publication heaven. This pause facilitates an opportunity to take more meaning and deepen my learning from the work I have done and am doing. It halts a potential trajectory of bounding from problem to problem, study to study, thereby avoiding an overly iterative approach to self-study. It is important for me to know how my identity *as a caring teacher educator* remains visible in the research work I do. I see value in analyzing my research to inquire as to whether I am remaining true to my philosophy of care for the learners I teach and to the integrity of self-study research. My experience of the metaphorical conveyor belt may resonate with other researchers feeling pressure to publish, and this paper reinforces the value of stepping back to re-focus on the contribution self-study makes to our work as teacher educators.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze two specific domains of potential interest to other S-STEP researchers captured by the following research questions:

1. How is my 'ethic of care' as a core principal in my teaching philosophy, visible in my self-study research trajectory over time?
2. How has my self-study research with others reflected progression and development in terms of self-study methodology and rigour?

My research questions emerge from a need to understand more about the dynamics of my expanding research into self-study and S-STEP. I explore the extent to which my teaching philosophy is woven into, or visible in the self-study work I do. I am interested in the developmental trajectory my self-study research has taken and sharing this work offers early self-study researchers an insight into

my *stepping back* so that they too might explore their own developments and philosophical underpinnings journeying through similar or different work. I investigate whether there has been a progression in my self-study practice, with regard to the incorporation of the key elements of self-study methodology, over time (LaBoskey, 2004). This research inquires into my existing self-study research *as pedagogy*, to evaluate in a cumulative and philosophical way, the impact of my research on my professional identity and practice. Zeichner (2007) identifies value in accumulating knowledge *across* self-studies in teacher education, but I suggest that there is also value in looking analytically at one's own self-studies with others, over time. I hope through this work to deepen my understanding of my teacher education practice and my development as a self-study researcher. Consequently, by sharing this work, this paper provides potentially useful insights for others in the field to re-imagine the outcomes of their previous self-study research, and to re-visit professional practice foci for new meaning and potential new emergent learning.

## Methods

It is important to differentiate between reflection and self-study for the purposes of this paper. In my self-study work to date, reflection on an issue of practice has been an inherent element within my teaching, but self-study has reshaped my reflections to enable a deeper understanding about practice that has led to specific changes to my practice (see Hamilton, 2018). Similarly, this paper does not rely solely on reflection but is a form of *Meta* self-study because I am self-initiating the retrospective re-analysis of mainly qualitative data sources across a range of self-study work and communicating the learning *about* and the learning *from* that process. This is important as it enables others to challenge, comment on, extend, or translate these outcomes to their personal or professional context (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). This inquiry into my cumulative self-study research using the methodological approach detailed in 1-4 below, was

conducted with due regard for the integral characteristics of self-study (LaBoskey, 2004), and with due consideration of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Craig, 2009).

Steps taken in 'stepping back' to generate findings for this self-study of prior work:

1. Revisiting the aims, foci and inductive analysis of all data from prior self-studies to categorize a range of key themes *across* these self-studies. (see Table 1)
2. From this categorization, identifying instances that indicate or challenge an ethic of care, as per my teaching philosophy.
3. Systematically reviewing each of the self-studies to identify the developmental trajectory in terms of research focus and the use of the key characteristics of self-study.
4. Stages 1/2/3 were evidenced by keeping (as new data) a weekly reflective diary for 6 months from June 2019 to December 2019, to note any thoughts and reflections during the analysis of my past self-studies.

The use of my past selves as critical friends was difficult to navigate and manage. The work of Manke and Allender (2006) on retrospective artefact analysis informed my approach to revisiting the data and in doing so opened up memories of my 'self in practice' at the times the data was created and received. I began by re-reading all of the data, reflections, presentations, and papers related to each of my previous self-studies, to reposition myself and step back into a past self. As I read, I used the characteristics of self-study (LaBoskey, 2004) as a

scaffold to categorize each study, recording the self-initiated focus, interaction, and data sources (see Table 1). This made it easier to analyze and evidence where care for learners was visible or less evident in each of the studies. I highlighted points of interest in the data and noted moments where care was evidenced. Then, I reflected on these moments, writing brief excerpts or comments in my journal, as potential points of interest. In this way, I used a hybrid analysis approach, using constant comparison and a system of inductive coding and categorization to generate themes. Following the categorization of the self-studies and revisiting of the data and outcomes, I engaged in reflection for an hour every week for six months (as 4 above) to think about and record my motivation for becoming involved in, or for in initiating each of the self-studies. I reflected on the value of evidenced new learning about self-study identified through this re-analysis but importantly, considered the value of new learning about myself in practice. It was during these times that my relationship with my past reflections, retrospective feedback, and my past selves became clearer. Sometimes care was very transparent and highly visible in actions I took, other times care was implicit in my practice. Over time, I was able to push myself to extend my thinking about why I researched what I did, how rigorous my engagement with self-study was, and what learning was actualized as a result. These critical conversations were captured as personal notes to myself in my weekly reflective journal.

## **Discussion**

Table 1 presents the reader with an insight into the six self-studies conducted (or in progress) since 2015 and used as data for the purposes of this paper. This table is useful and necessary to provide a context within which to discuss the two key research questions posed. It provides readers with a synopsis of the studies referred to in the discussion and categorized according to La Boskey's (2004) characteristics of self-study.



**Table 1***Synopsis Self-Study Research Projects*

<b>Self-Initiated &amp; Self-Focus Problem</b>	<b>Improvement Outcome/Focus</b>	<b>Interaction with &amp; Data Sources</b>	<b>Trustworthiness</b>
Bridging the Gap from Teacher to Teacher Educator: The Role of a Teaching Portfolio Broad Focus: Transition from teaching science to becoming a teacher educator in science education (Study A-Aug 2015-March 2017)	Management of critical incidents Mediation of institutional constraints Mitigating transition difficulties, to teach better	Critical friend and mentor data Peer observation reports Feedback panel Reviews Student feedback Reflective teaching portfolio	Dependability Credibility via triangulation Confirmability-shared audit trail Dissemination

Evidence-based portfolios: a cross-sectoral approach to professional development among teachers  
 Broad Focus: Analysing teacher learning from a professional development project using self-study as the guiding research approach (Study B- January 2018 to June 2018)

Teacher practice change/new knowledge of self-study  
 Collaboration and creation of teacher support structures to scaffold members  
 Researcher learning across many domains

Critical friend; individual interview and focus group data; teaching portfolio produced by participants  
 Individual reflection (teachers & researcher)

Confirmability  
 Participant voice & shared audit trail  
 Multiple data sources  
 Dissemination

Teachers and  
 Teacher  
 Educators  
 Researching  
 Their Practice:  
 A Dually  
 Purposed Self-  
 Study  
 Broad Focus:  
 Analysing  
 researcher  
 learning while  
 facilitating  
 teacher  
 research using  
 a dual self-  
 study approach  
 (Study C-  
 January 2018  
 to September  
 2018)

New researcher  
 knowledge of  
 power of teacher  
 extant beliefs  
 Researcher  
 facilitation & skill  
 improvement  
 Researcher  
 learning about  
 research design  
 Learning  
 about communities  
 of practice

Reflective  
 journaling  
 Focus  
 groups on  
 research  
 process and  
 design  
 Teaching  
 portfolio  
 produced  
 by teachers,  
 mentored  
 by  
 researcher

Contextual  
 transferability  
 Multiple data sources  
 Dissemination

A Self-Study Exploring how a Research Project on Climate Change enhances Science Education Practice and promotes Researcher Citizenship Broad Focus: How has self- study prompted thinking about my 'self' as a teacher of science and a global citizen? (Study D- September 2018 to December 2020)	Subject matter knowledge on environmental science Raised awareness of moral ambiguity around researcher actions Enhanced faculty interdisciplinary collaboration	Reflective journal Critical friend audio and email data Shared reflections between critical friends, dually conducting separate self-studies Student feedback on climate change science resources	Contextual transferability Multiple data sources Credibility-triangulation Dissemination
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<b>Reflexive Self-study and mentorship: Knowing the 'self' and 'other' before entering the research field</b> <b>Broad Focus: How does self-study promote and scaffold reflexivity through mentorship between a novice and more experienced researcher? How can such a mentorship enhance mutual learning while conducting research on widening working class male participation in ITE? (Study E-December 2018 to present).</b>	<b>New theoretical knowledge on theories of inequality in education</b> <b>Research skill development through co-design of project</b> <b>Enhanced understanding of the role of identity and context in working with others</b> <b>Being reflexive to manage undue influence and bias transmission to novice researchers</b>	<b>Recorded discussion between researchers</b> <b>Online shared space to collect commentary and critique of potential theoretical perspectives</b> <b>Co-development of data collection interview schedules for use with participants</b> <b>Reflective journaling</b> <b>Critical friend feedback on writing</b>	<b>Confirmability</b> <b>Participant voice &amp; shared audit trail</b> <b>Contextual transferability</b>
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<p>A collaborative and interdisciplinary self-study of a team of teacher educators developing an institutional self-study hub.</p> <p>Broad Focus: To capture our learning as a team leading and facilitating the co-creation of knowledge about self-study research (Study F-April 2019 to present)</p>	<p>Research ongoing: To develop a support structure for faculty interested in learning about self-study research</p> <p>To share positive experiences among the leadership team of their self-study work</p> <p>Enhance student experience as colleagues engage with self-study to improve their understanding of practice</p>	<p>Leadership team meetings recorded</p> <p>Co-creation of an initial yearlong CPD programme for faculty</p> <p>interested in self-study</p> <p>Group reflections post session (leaders)</p> <p>Focus groups with participants</p> <p>Participant reflection</p>	<p>Contextual transferability</p> <p>Multiple data sources</p> <p>Credibility-triangulation</p>
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The creation of this framework in Table 1 enabled me to identify a permeating care ethic towards students and adult learners I worked with during the processes of research. It also provided a chronological structure within which to analyse the presence of some or all of the self-study characteristics, across the scope of this research. Evidence of an ethic of care as it pertains to study A is evident in the following reflective excerpt from my journal:

Looking back, it is clear that relational care and trust underpin the learning goals I set for the students I teach. What I am still trying to achieve with my students is that

they become confident and knowledgeable in both the science content and pedagogical content. I believe that teaching from a care perspective provides a safe space for the students to learn and presents learning as a relational and cognitive endeavour. My philosophy facilitates student teachers' learning in a way that enables them to transition from college as competent and caring practitioners. I do what I do because it made a difference to my learning when teachers cared for me, so I understand the power of care.

Examples of this care in action in study A include:

I experimented with and used (and still do) constructivist pedagogies such as cooperative inquiry based learning, which demonstrates for students how effective science knowledge and skill development is possible, for them and their pupils. I see relational interdependence as *encompassing and enabling* of effective teaching and learning in science education. Within *respect-ful* spaces, the learning of science content and pedagogy becomes more enjoyable, accessible and achievable for me and for the students I teach.

I still teach using many of the same techniques and strategies today. On reflection, what has changed most for me since this first self-study (study A) is that I am more proficient now in using a variety of approaches to facilitate effective teacher education experiences with my students. This enhanced self-efficacy has enabled me to step back and think more about the students as people, as diverse individuals, rather than as another group traveling through the system. I am more

caring and more empathetic towards my students' struggles with confidence and the complexity of learning how to teach, now that I have traveled that same path myself. While my subsequent self-study work has less direct care implications for the students I teach, there is evidence of tacit care in all six studies. My work with a cross-sectoral group of in-career teachers and teacher educators (study B & C) demonstrates that care for the learner is a positive requisite for all new learning, even among experienced practitioners. This study cemented my belief that in all the work I do with other educators, there is valuable self-learning to relate back to my teacher education practice. A reflective entry from my journal written in August 2019 evidences this.

Looking at subsequent self-studies it seems at surface level that I have moved beyond exploration of my teacher education practice, but this is not the case. Sharing my knowledge of self-study and portfolio writing with in-career teachers, (e.g. study B/C) broadened my understanding and awareness of the system and contextual constraints my students will soon face in practice. It also enhanced my facilitation skills, making me better able to support student learning. Similarly, care for learners is visible in self-study E and F where I capture the experiences of mentoring and collaborating with novice researchers, be it individually (E) or with a collective group (F).

Evidence of my self-study data indicates that while my teaching philosophy based on an 'ethic of care' has permeated my self-study questions and actions in practice, a modified teaching philosophy incorporating an emergent identity as a teacher educator has evolved.



This identity has required me to exploit the scope of self-study in areas, which do not directly relate to my teacher education practice. For example, I wrote a chapter on climate change for an academic publication, but by conducting a concurrent self-study (D) during this process, I identified that I was not adequately integrating 'environmental care' in my teaching of the curriculum strands; *materials, energy and forces* and *living things* in science education. Self-study highlighted how my new knowledge of climate change provided an opportunity to teach environmental science more confidently and thus effectively to my students this semester.

Study E relates to my mentorship of a Ph.D. student engaging in research, as a novice in the field. Our collaborative research study explores the barriers facing working-class boys entering initial teacher education (ITE). Hidden beneath and inherent in the self-study on mentorship is evidence of care for the student researcher, but also care about the need for giving voice to a marginalized group experiencing social injustice within the field of ITE. Therefore, self-study has provided me with new learning about my practice from a micro (classroom level perspective-study A/D) perspective, relating mainly to the techniques of teaching and complexity of teacher education (Palmer, 2007). In these ways, self-study has been invaluable in highlighting and enabling an exploration of critical incidents where shifting boundaries between care-work for students and policy interact.

More recently, my self-study research has widened to explore macro domains more tacitly related to my teacher education practice, yet providing valuable learning about critical perspectives influencing teacher education (study E). The decision by a group of colleagues to share epistemologies and experiences of our self-study work, led to our co-establishment of an institutional self-study hub (study F) this year. This evidences broader care about teacher education and my growing confidence in the value of S-STEP as a means of supporting my colleagues in our faculty, inquiring into their practice.

The findings in this paper suggest that it has taken me significant time to become more confident in including the elements of self-study (LeBoskey, 2004) meaningfully into each piece of research. This is especially challenging in the early stages of developing an S-STEP or self-study research practice. Therefore, as I developed as a teacher educator over time, I also developed more rigorous, critical and systematic understandings about self-study. Importantly, in an era where teacher educators are under increasing pressure to publish (Berry, 2004; Dinkelman et al. 2006), there is value in evaluating and sharing the developmental and/or diverse types of self-study work we are doing. Interrogations of my past selves evinced how self-study has grown *with me* as I developed as a teacher educator, but that questions about my practice remain. An excerpt from my reflective journal highlights this:

Looking again at study A, I acknowledge in this paper that I use features of self-study in a *light* way. Moving on to subsequent self-study foci, I was more aware of consciously incorporating more of the elements of self-study, as I grew in confidence. More varied data sources were followed by more formalised critical friend interactions, greater collaboration, and *riskier* use of the self-study elements in the sense that some unorthodoxy in my shift away from traditional self-study is evident. I have begun stretching the pedagogy to enable self-study to be a part of all the research I do, because I am growing more comfortable with it. Then, I wonder if this has shifted my focus in an inauthentic way from the practice of teaching. Am I beginning to play with methodological innovation, at the expense of simply focusing directly on my role as a teacher educator? I am unsure...

It is widely agreed that a teaching philosophy is enacted in the pedagogical actions and practices of the teacher (O Farrell, 2007). I suggest that a teaching philosophy can also inform one's research niche and choice of research approach. This retrospective analysis of cumulative self-study data and findings informs my teacher education practice and helps direct future self-study research. However, this process of conducting a meta-analysis of my past self-studies is problematic, because stepping back retrospectively as a changed practitioner is difficult. The focus on my established and inherent philosophy of teaching has made this process easier. It provided a framework upon which to analyse retrospective data artefacts and upon which to attach experiences, past and present. This process has supported my deepened understanding of the complexities inherent in S-STEP research (Loughran, 2004). This inquiry process has confirmed that in my self-study work with others, I remain firmly aligned to my philosophical stance care for the students I teach. This process has confirmed that I have become more effective in incorporating the elements of self-study into the problems I pose and the questions I ask. However, it has raised new questions, like whether I am relying primarily on self-study as a means to support my scholarship, rather than a focus on improving my understanding of my teaching practice. My research developmental trajectory has indicated a shift away from a direct gaze at my teacher education practice in the classroom. However, self-study has enabled me to explore research projects that have a less direct, but nonetheless significant, impact on my understanding of the complex and multiple personal and professional identities I embody as a teacher, scholar and citizen.

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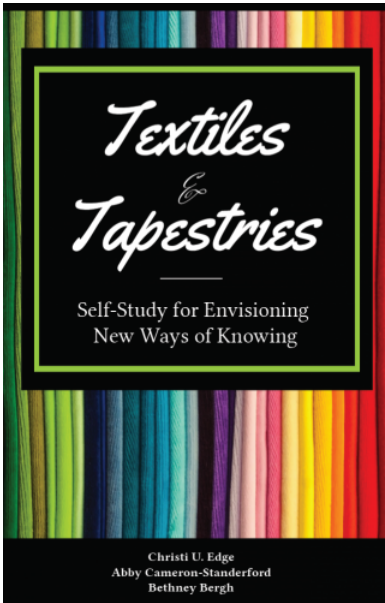
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Hamilton, M. (2020). An Ethic of Care and Shifting Self-Study Research: Weaving the Past, Present, and Future. In C. Edge, A. Cameron-Standerford, & B. Bergh (Eds.), *Textiles and Tapestries*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from [https://edtechbooks.org/textiles\\_tapestries\\_self\\_study/cha-pter\\_108](https://edtechbooks.org/textiles_tapestries_self_study/cha-pter_108)



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