

# **Retrospective Self-Study**

## **Analysis of the Impact of Methods on Thinking, Teaching, and Community**

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This idea of a retrospective self-study grew out of Deborah's interest in reflecting upon over twenty years of self-study research on her professional practice. As colleagues at the same teacher education program in the Midwest region of the United States, we came together to examine this idea of the influence methods have on making sense of professional practice. Throughout this paper, we will use first person *I* to represent Deborah's voice, and first-person *we* to reflect our understanding of our work together.

My experience of using self-study methodology (LaBoskey, 2004, 2009; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013; Hawley, 2010; Samaras & Freese, 2006) across my career as a teacher educator was an important influence on my development as a scholar and as a teacher educator. Over the years, within each study focus, I saw how self-study helped me to understand my own practice and my engagement with content and students within specific contexts of teaching (e.g., Tidwell, 1998, 2000, 2002b; Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004; Tidwell & Hoewing, 2009; Tidwell 2016). Whether examining the dynamics of my engagement with students in a large lecture hall (Tidwell, 2002a), examining my collaboration with educators in bilingual classrooms (Tidwell & Wymore, 2008; Tidwell, Wymore, et al., 2008) or in schools providing literacy instruction to students with significant disabilities (Tidwell & Staples, 2017; Tidwell, Thompson, et al., 2014), or examining with colleagues our use of humor in teaching (Muchmore et al., 2016), self-study was my methodology of choice to examine practice.

Within self-study, the methods by which I gathered data and determined meaning evolved and changed over time. While I have an overall understanding of the influence of one study on the development of another, I have not attempted a larger examination of the impact of self-study across my work. This paper presents our attempt at an analysis of my self-study research over time, and in particular the methods I used within self-study methodology. We examined how the use of self-study methods informed my understanding of practice and of teaching and teacher education. Borrowing from frameworks in the literature on developing self-study research (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Paugh & Robinson, 2009; Samaras, 2011), we defined method as data (*what* is being gathered), to answer the research question(s) of the study, and the data collection (*how* data are gathered) and analysis (the *process* of examination of that data).

The examination of my self-study research was influenced by what Bullock and Percy (2018) refer to as “taking a ‘turn’ on the reflexive

turn... to move beyond individual stories...toward an explanation of how such a turn changes their practice and contributes to research more broadly" (p. 21). Through a retrospective examination of over 20 years of self-study research, this paper attempts to address the following question: Within my use of self-study methodology, what is the impact/influence of my use of self-study methods on my understanding of my own practice and a broader understanding of meaning making?

## Methods

Narrative analysis of personal and professional histories (Kitchen, 2005; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Young & Erickson, 2011) was used in the retrospective analysis of the data along with the process of concept analysis found in the work of Walker and Avant (2014) where they address the creation of conceptual meaning within theory development. Goodman's (2014) notion of retrospective miscue analysis in reading also informed our thinking about how the reflection on what has occurred can be reviewed within both past and present contexts to make meaning of the initial engagement.

Narrative analysis provided a frame for examining the papers and publications, while concept analysis shaped themes during the analysis process. Throughout the study, the use of retrospective analysis helped to pull together data over time to make meaning. Data selection

This study focused specifically on self-study research presented at conferences or published in conference proceedings, in journals, or in book chapters. In determining what was considered *my self-study research*, I thought through what I meant by the term *my* and focused specifically on what I saw as the study of my own practice. As I sought to eliminate studies in which I was the critical friend, it became less clear as a distinct variable because some of the self-study research of another's practice also provided the opportunity for me to examine my

own practice using my colleague's lens as a critical friend. My final selection defined the notion of my self-study research as any research in which I attempted to engage in the examination of my own practice through self-study methodology. In addition, each presentation at the biennial Castle Conference was only counted once as a publication in the conference proceedings.

## **Data Analysis Process**

We examined a total of 26 artifacts, representing ten national conference presentations, eight published castle proceedings articles, seven book chapters, and one journal article. Data were coded using the following process. A driving focus within the process of data analysis was to more closely examine the change (if any) in artifacts and analysis of artifacts over time. Initially, the publications and presentations were examined as a story of academia, representing the public unfolding of the professional life. In addition, the artifacts were examined for larger themes. An adaptation of the constant comparative method (Cresswell, 2014) was used to examine more closely the language found within the discussion of data type, collection and analysis process. This analysis led to a greater understanding of the types of data used, and the methods employed to analyze data. In addition, a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) across the artifacts examined the focus and context of each study, evidence of chronology across studies through the connection of results informing future studies, and evidence of collaboration within and across the studies. Codes were then collapsed into major themes (Watson, 2018).

## **Results**

Initial analysis of the studies from 1996 to 2019 revealed a growing change in self-study methodology use from initial studies in 1996 and 1998 to self-study research in 2000 and beyond. Early studies showed

a focus on students and student data as a venue to examine the efficacy of my teaching practice. Over the years I repeatedly shared the story of the impact that the first Castle Conference had on my understanding of self-study methodology. While presenting the data on the practical argument of my students in a literacy clinic course, I examined how their practical argument discussions revealed what they understood about literacy theory and practice. From this data, I was able to surmise that the students' performances using practical arguments reflected the efficacy of my practice. At the close of my presentation, John Loughran provided some feedback using a stove metaphor that at first sounds rather simple, but was quite profound. He suggested I take the students' data and put that on the back burner, and move myself onto the front burner to examine directly. Putting myself in the spotlight for data collection was a turning point in my understanding of self-study. This realization seems obvious in 2020, but in 1996 I had come into self-study research from a strong quantitative background, and this notion of examining one's own actions, thinking, and language to understand practice was a pivotal moment. After that initial Castle Conference experience, I revisited the theory behind my self-study work and reflected on my own process for self-study, realizing that examining others' practical arguments was actually an indirect self-study through others. In other words, "I had created a self-study that kept me at a distance from examining my own teaching directly" (Tidwell, 1998, p. 303).

While the self-study methodology was new and growing in the 1990s, and the community's understanding of what we meant by self-study was evolving and changing, my understanding of self-study mirrored that change. By 1998, I began to change my focus from solely on my students (Tidwell & Heston, 1996, 1998) to directly on my own experiences (Tidwell, 1998). The examination of these 26 self-study artifacts revealed a plethora of information about my teaching practice, my understanding of self-study, and my use of data and choices of method. Two findings are highlighted from this self-study. One finding looks at the chronicling of my self-study journey in the

use of methods and in data analyses. Through this unfolding story, the use of self-study methods over time reflect the innovative changes in methods used within the community and the impact this had on my own thinking about what is meant by artifacts. The second finding looks at the larger themes that emerged from examining the studies, and in particular the synthesis of my self-study method used across time with the analyses and discussion of data. From these sources, themes emerged that reflected the evolving change in my method use, the connections (and sometimes disconnections) revealed from one study to the next, the community dynamic and relations that developed across self-study work with colleagues, and the profound nature of self-study on pondering about one's own practice.

## **The Roadmap of My Self-Study Journey**

Another result that came out of this self-study was a roadmap of my self-study journey highlighting the specific methods used over time. Beginning with an early attempt at self-study that looked at others rather than myself (Tidwell & Heston, 1996, 1998), my journey in methods moved from an analysis of students' language about their own practice to an examination of my own course artifacts to better understand my university teaching (Tidwell, 1998). In this second self-study, I used course-provided materials (syllabi, course content being addressed, and class presentations) as the data sources. These artifacts were text-based, where the text was analyzed for key components. I was new to narrative analysis, and the process I used was not clearly defined. The three themes that emerged were personal knowledge of students, personal contact with students, and student-centered instruction. While I had moved to a focus on my own teaching and used artifacts from my teaching, my real focus continued to be on the students, and how I related or connected to my students. In 2000, my experience in self-study moved me to take a risk and examine what I saw as an issue of equity in my teaching practice. This third self-study began with a research question on how I was

reflecting equity in my practice (Tidwell, 2000). I realized that my research question presumed I demonstrated equity, and revised the question to reflect a more fundamental query: Am I equitable in my teaching practice? I used case study design, looking closely at three students with whom I worked in different programs (undergrad, master's, and doctoral levels). The artifacts were stories about the students that were created through post teaching journal entries, and through instructional documentation that included class notes and notes from meetings with students. This was the first time I documented the use of a colleague for feedback on my data. The stories about each of the three students were revised after feedback and included information from a narrative analysis of my journal entries and notes. The stories were then used as a reflection of my practice. The conclusions from this self-study revealed a lack of equity in my engagement, with a preference for students who were compliant and who fulfilled my needs as a professor. I found this self-study not only disturbing but one that I cautioned myself about making public, concerned it would reflect poorly on me as an educator. This was my first real experience with self-study and vulnerability. Through the use of a critical friend, I was able to see how my greater knowledge about one student enabled me to engage more effectively in that context than with the other students. In sharing this study with others, I found myself being vulnerable in a very public way. My plans were to continue in this vein by self-study of my practice on how I can better get to know my students. This projected segue to my next self-study did not happen, as the context for my teaching changed to a large hall lecture. I never returned to this interest in examining how I get to know my students. Rather, I moved on to examining my practice in different teaching contexts.

From a methods perspective, 2002 was a pivotal year. I began using drawings as data to reflect the dynamics in my teaching practice (Tidwell, 2002b). The context for my teaching had changed from a small classroom with approximately 25 students to a large lecture hall. In this large lecture hall, I was working with undergraduate

students in a field-based literacy assessment class. I had read about Richardson's (1998) use of self-portraits as a form of data collection and was intrigued by this. Since I enjoyed drawing, I used post-teaching nodal moments from my class as documentation of my reflection on teaching. As I became involved in the creation of these visual representations, I was able to represent through one visual moment in time a reflection of how I felt about that teaching moment. I came to realize the power of visuals in capturing what I saw as a significant moment in time. The data revealed to me insights into teaching in large groups that I had previously been unaware of. Initially, the organization of the course with online support for course content and discussion/email was positive, and my drawings reflected that optimism. I appreciated the stage setting for performing to a class. But over time, my drawings showed a disconnect, a distance between myself and my students that echoed earlier concerns in a previous self-study about distance in my teaching. This documentation of distance through visuals and then through the narrative description of that dynamic helped me to document the need for smaller class size. Using drawings as visual representation of meaning in my practice became a method of choice across several self-studies, often bringing in colleagues as co-researchers in their own practice or as critical friends in the self-study process (Muchmore, et al., 2016; Tidwell, 2006; Tidwell et al., 2006; Tidwell, 2007; Tidwell & Manke, 2009). The use of drawings as visual representation was also seen as a metaphor for a larger issue within practice. In our work as administrators, Tidwell and Manke (2009) used drawings to represent key moments in our professional leadership work. We found the visual as metaphor powerful in expressing issues reflecting dynamics with specific individuals, thought processes within our work, and power issues in facilitating programs.

Working with colleagues became a more prevalent self-study approach as I began to collaborate on areas of shared interests. Through collaboration, I saw an increase in my professional partnership on campus with my colleague (Tidwell & Heston, 1996,



1998, 2010a, 2010b, 2012), in local educational systems (Tidwell & Meyer, 2010; Tidwell, Thompson et al., 2014; Tidwell & Wymore, 2008; Tidwell, Wymore, et al., 2008; Tidwell et al., 2011), and nationally (Muchmore et al., 2016; Tidwell & Manke, 2009; Tidwell, Manke, et al., 2008; Tidwell, Schwartz et al., 2014). The use of critical friends was consistent across all these studies, with the very nature of collaboration allowing for a critical examination of data with colleagues of shared interests and experiences.

Opportunities to read others' self-study research, and to meet at AERA and the Castle Conference to share current self-study work has informed my thinking on not only how to develop self-study design (methods and data analyses) but also on what to study. Hearing about others' self-studies, and learning how they were engaging with others and with their data, greatly informed my thinking about my own self-study focus and method choices. An example of this is Coia and Taylor's (2004) presentation on feminism, past history, and self-study of practice; their research intrigued me. Over time, I became interested in the relationship between family culture and classroom engagement. With my two siblings, we examined our own family history using real-time internet video recordings to discuss childhood stories growing up in a matriarchal family structure (Tidwell, Schwartz, et al., 2014). We transcribed our stories, then reread their content, and used narrative analysis to examine both the story content and our language use. While this self-study was tied to my own teaching dynamics and biases in the classroom - we found the most intriguing outcome from this experience was the uncovering of pervasive feminism in our family dynamics, from both our mother and our father.

Using real-time internet video recording as the primary data source has been a recurring method used in my self-studies with colleagues which allows us to engage and record actions and language for later analysis. In one self-study, I examined my use of self-study methodology for professional development with teachers to facilitate

their desired change in teaching practice (Tidwell, 2015). In a second study, I examined the use of synchronous online instruction (Tidwell, 2016). Both of these studies worked in collaboration with teachers involved in staff development or the course. In a more recent collaboration with two colleagues from other universities in the US, we used real-time internet video recording to discuss our use of humor in our teaching (Muchmore et al., 2016). Across these studies using video recordings, we examined practice through both physical movement documentation (facial expression, use of hands, and overall physical movement), and transcription of language. Such an analysis combines the physical with the spoken to help elicit meaning within the engagement. The pattern of methods across these 20+ years of self-study research has shown a range of method use, but three methods emerge as recurring method preference: visual representation, video recording, and narrative. With a focus on the language within course materials, video recordings, journal entries, and narrative description of visual representations, narrative data has been commonly used across most of my self-studies. Narrative analysis has shown evidence of evolving and improving over time from a simple focus on key terminology to a deeper analysis of meaning units and phrases that incorporate a coding system focused on meaning representation.

## **Emerging Themes**

Analysis of the 26 artifacts resulted in four major themes emerging from the data: practice as evolution, conceptual bridging, relational invention, and ponderism. The development of practice reflects change over time, where the very process of practice (both self-study and teaching) is an evolutionary dynamic. From the evolving maturity of my understanding of self-study methodology (Tidwell, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2000b; Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004), to the increased use of narrative data coupled with visual representation (Tidwell, 2006, 2007; Tidwell & Manke, 2009; Tidwell et al, 2006) and video

documentation as data (Tidwell, Thompson, et al., 2014), to the use of an object as data (Tidwell et al., 2019), the examination of self-study has shown an evolution of how I use specific data sources in my methods. This was less so in how I choose to analyze those data. Data evolved from use of teaching artifacts such as syllabi and class presentation notes, to larger conceptual ideas such as professional histories and the retelling of an event, to visual representation through drawn nodal moments in teaching or administrative work, to the larger conceptual idea of an object representing practice (Tidwell et al., 2019). While data sources expanded and changed, my data analysis relied on the use of narrative to explicate the meaning. Video data were analyzed using narrative derived from the language and the action descriptions within the video. Visual data and object data were translated into narrative for analysis. While my narrative analysis became more sophisticated and in-depth over time, the resource for making meaning continued to be text-based. My teaching practice demonstrated an evolution over time as well. Much of the change in my practice has come from a deeper understanding of dynamics in the classroom, of my engagement with students, and of the presumptions I bring to my teaching. Self-study helped me to understand my practice in a way that informs my thinking about the interaction between theory and practice, and the meaning embedded within my language and actions.

Conceptual bridging represents the connections we make within data and across studies that bridge the theory building with the connotative. For example, in a self-study of administrative practice using drawings representing nodal moments in practice (Tidwell & Manke, 2009), the understanding of *power brokering* emerged from a drawing connoting power and tensions as seen through the sketch of an antagonist.

Another form of conceptual bridging is the connection of methods across studies, as seen in complexity of use and application to new contexts. For example, whether I was examining my teaching (Tidwell,

2002b), my administrative work (Tidwell et al., 2019; Tidwell & Manke, 2009), or my dynamics with colleagues (Tidwell, Thompson, et al., 2014; Tidwell et al., 2011), visual representation was used. Conceptual bridging is seen in my shift from using more concrete examples of practice to employing creative representations as data. What I am interested in researching is driven by what I value in my practice, and through my continued self-study of practice emerges the unearthing of additional or deeper questions, reflecting the conceptual bridging of my research foci over time.

Relational invention represents the dynamic nature of community within self-study, where the role of professional relationships greatly informed practice (self-study and teaching). My earlier self-study research (Tidwell, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) involved myself and, in some studies, a critical friend. My presentation of my research at professional conferences afforded community engagement with my study. As my self-studies developed over time, I used collaboration with colleagues as a center stone for my research design. Collaboration within my self-study research altered what I studied as well, from working with classroom teachers on bilingual instruction (Tidwell, Wymore, et al., 2008) and literacy instruction for children with significant disabilities (Tidwell, Thompson, et al., 2014), to working with teacher education colleagues on our use of humor in teaching (Muchmore et al., 2016), to working with self-study colleagues on the use of visual representation as data (Tidwell & Manke, 2009; Tidwell et al., 2006).

Through these collaborations, we intentionally created professional relationships that ultimately fostered a sense of community and enabled me to create (invent) my self-study research that was informed by critical friendships and shared meaning making.

The final theme, ponderism, suggests a less serious focus but is a truly critical aspect of the shifting understanding of teaching and of self-study. It is through the process of ongoing self-study research

that examining practice becomes a theoretically grounded vortex of pondering, questioning and pushing the notion of what is and what should be. It is this infernal vortex of pondering that changes the perspective of teaching and research. From the very beginning of my self-study research, the process of engagement with others (whether through professional presentations, critical friendships, collegial engagement, or the process of writing on self-study) provides a continual informed and ongoing discussion about what practice is, what it means, and how it reflects the grounded theoretical intentions. Self-study, by design, evokes? this notion of pondering, to ponder one's practice, and to engage in an ongoing examination of that practice which by its nature encourages a continued need to contemplate further.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In this paper, we examined what 26 studies from one educator's research represents. We came away with a deeper appreciation of the power of self-study in understanding practice, whether that practice involves teaching or the use of research methods. The notion of practice as evolution speaks to the very nature of self-study as a community-based scholarship where researchers examine their practice for authentic and meaningful purposes.

Pondering emerged from the study as a critical dynamic within self-study. We discovered that it is through pondering that self-study becomes a progressive process that builds on previous studies. The collaborative aspects of self-study inform how to think about the focus of the next self-study, the next research design, the next methods to be used. We found through this retrospective examination of research that self-study informs practice in ways that change how we think about our practice, our research design, and ourselves as educators.

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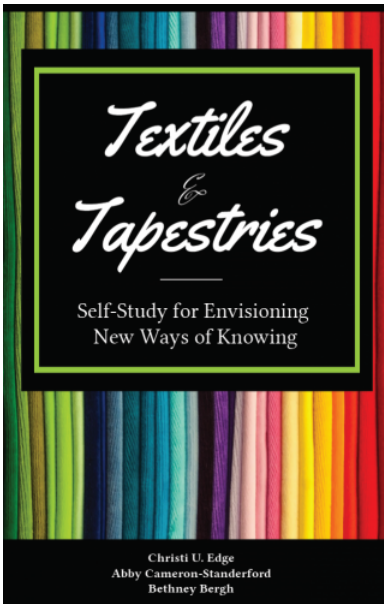
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