

# Envisioning Writing as a Way of Knowing in Self-Study

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Writing a scholarly paper, according to Richardson (2000), is “not just a mopping up activity at the end of a research project” (p. 923). Rather, writing can be “a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (p. 923), a craft that expresses reality, and an art that profoundly affects readers. Indeed, a well-written self-study should rise above being a functional and informative textile to become a precisely and delicately crafted tapestry that artfully tells the story of the research in order to evoke understanding in the reader and, even, prompt changes in practice. Qualitative research at its best uses “evocative writing” and features “highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural” (p. 929). Teacher educators writing self-studies would do well to envision writing as a method of inquiry, one that adds clarity to the research ‘findings’ and artfully engages the reader.

The results of a self-study research project are the yarns used in weaving the textile of a research paper. Just as a quality textile is woven precisely to be thick and durable, a research paper needs to be crafted carefully to convey the findings and implications. A textile becomes a tapestry when it is designed to be more than merely functional. So too the self-study researcher becomes an artisan when the scholarly paper is polished and responsive to the reader. The artisan becomes an artist, in both mediums, through the refinement of creative skills and the ambition the imagination to render the work as conceptually clear, evocative and/or beautiful.

Thus, as writers, it behooves us to become more metacognitive about the yarns we spin. In reading educational research on practice, we should take notice of the structure, reasoning, and rhetoric of the quality academic writing we experience. We might begin by selecting quality thread used; Richardson makes a strong case for employing notes to improve writing at various stages of a qualitative inquiry itself.

The writing of a research paper is also a craft with guidelines for effective communication. While submission guidelines offer technical support, authors often lack direction on how to craft manuscripts that are analytic, creative, and engaging. Richardson’s five criteria for reviewing papers are a useful framework for making the craft of self-study writing explicit. First, manuscripts must make a substantive contribution to the field. Second, aesthetic merit should be evident in the crafting of words and images, as well as creative analysis. Third, reflexivity is evident in how authors puzzle over ‘truth’ and ‘knowing’ in a postmodern world.

Fourth, a manuscript’s impact is evident in how it affects the reader emotionally and intellectually. Finally, the expression of reality seems *true*: “a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’” (p. 937).

## Objectives

This chapter focuses on the writing process in the self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) through the writing process as experienced by a practitioner with extensive experience as a writer and editor of self-studies and other educational texts. Through reflection on writing, I make explicit writing processes in self-study that are generally implicit, and often invisible, to novices. These themes, inspired by the writing as research literature, emerged from the research:

1. Value of Notes on Research/Practice;
2. Making Sense through Writing;
3. Making the Writing Seem *True*;
4. Crafting for the Reader.

Readers are encouraged to reflect on their own writing and the ways in which writing is employed as a method of inquiry in S-STEP. In the Castle presentation, the audience will be invited to discuss these themes in relation to their own writing.

## Methods

This chapter is and is not a self-study. It is a self-study in that as the author I am inquiring into my professional practices and through reflection on practice and reflection-in-action (Schön 1983) as a writer. As Martin and Russell (2020) wrote, “self-study of teacher education practices is a metacognitive and reflective practice conducted by teacher educators learning from experience” (p, xx). As self-study recognizes teaching experience as being “acquired by investing time in the context of professional action; learning from experience demands reflection-in-action as an alternative frame of reference for personal learning” (Martin & Russell, in press), a case can be made for studying one’s writing as a self-study process. Indeed, drawing on LaBoskey’s (2004) criteria for self-study, this chapter is self-initiated and focused, improvement- aimed, employs multiple, primarily qualitative methods, and is made available for exemplar-based validation. On the other hand, it is neither interactive nor a study of teaching or teacher education practice.

In this inquiry into the process of writing in self-study, I attempt to make sense of writing as a process in S-STEP. I explicitly attended to my thought processes as a writer engaged in such work. The main method employed is the keeping of a *journal* on my writing process while preparing self-study chapters and articles. As I engaged in the writing of field texts, or in the analysis of these texts, I paused to write journal entries on what I was thinking or feeling during those moments in the process. Similarly, as I composed the research papers, I wrote entries on the challenges I experienced and the choices I made as a writer. Reflections from the writing journal constitute the main content for this presentation. Secondary field texts include field notes and journal entries courses taught. Coding and analysis, combined with interactions with literature on the writing process, led to the identification of emergent themes that are developed in the next section.

## Reflections on Writing Well

The outcomes of this research are organized around themes related to writing well. Each theme is developed in relation to literature on effective writing. In each section, I draw on examples from my writing to reflect on how these themes are lived out in my writing process. It is hoped that these reflections will resonate with the experiences of self-study practitioners.

### ***Value of Notes on Research/Practice***

Teacher educators often recall events and explain how their experiences have informed their practice. But how do we know what they were thinking and feeling at the time? The best way, according to Richardson (2000) is taking extensive notes about one's experience of events as they happen or in the immediate aftermath. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use the term *field texts* to describe "the kinds of records, normally called data," that are "created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of the field experience" (p. 92). They refer to these "ongoing bits of nothingness that fill our days" (p. 104) as crucial to understanding both the self and the practices observed. These might take the form of journals, field notes, or an interweaving of the two. In my self-study field texts, I often interweave the two, employing italics to denote personal reflection. While qualitative researchers, such as myself, attempt to convey accounts that are thick with detail of events and our experience of those events, these field texts are "imbued... with interpretation" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 93) and "shaped by the selective interest or disinterest of [the] researcher" (p. 94). A journal is as important as a field note as it "becomes the 'historical record' for the writing of the Self or a writing-story about the writing process" (Richardson, 2000, p. 941).

For example, in my School and Society journal, I wrote immediately after a class:

Overall students had done well on their equity and diversity projects the previous week... They did not, however, acknowledge or address power and privilege... These limitations prompted me to reflect on the construction of the course and consider how I might better (re)present these concepts... In order to address power and privilege again, I began by sharing reflections on a talking circle with teachers working with Indigenous students... The Indigenous facilitator assured the teachers that there would be no 'no shaming or blaming,' while the Elder called for compassion and caring in dealing with Indigenous students who are hurting or acting out. In discussing the experience, I drew attention to the power and privilege of the white teachers in relation to their students. We also discussed how the research participants were learning to acknowledge their privilege and, through alternative pedagogic and relational approaches, sharing that power with students in order to help them make connections to their cultures... I urged them to consider the ideas learned in this course about inclusiveness, power and privilege, particularly as they engage with students with worldviews and experiences very different than their own. You need not accept what they say but at least weigh these in your deliberations teacher. (February 3, 2017)

In my courses, particularly those in which I am conducting self-studies, I keep extensive notes on research and practice. This includes the use of exit cards in order to understand teacher candidate learning. Exit cards, in addition to providing rich data, serve an interactive element that contributes to trustworthiness. My journal, which serves both as observational notes and personal reflections on

the lessons, documents events and my experiencing of them. These are thick descriptions of what I was actually thinking at the time, rather than vague recollections at a future date. This helps me make sense of classroom interactions and provides rich data for both improving my practice and sharing lessons learned with the S-STEP discourse community (e.g., Kitchen, 2020a).

### ***Making Sense through Writing***

Writing is a cognitive process in which we ‘word the world’ into existence through the language we use (Rose, 1992). It is through the process of writing that ideas are developed and meaning emerges. This is especially true in making sense of experience. It begins with telling and collecting stories, but understanding emerges from the multi-dimensional exploration of these stories. Such inquiry, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), takes place in a three-dimensional space: “Studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry, and they occur in specific places or sequence of places” (p. 50). As all experience simultaneously contains all these dimensions, narrative inquirers need to examine multiple dimensions in order to find meaning in experience. The experiences of individuals in a given moment need to be “contextualized within a longer-term collective story (Richardson, 2000). While writing takes place in the present moment, it is often complicated as understanding involves the interpretation of experiences that carry with them both past experiences and anticipates plans for the future. The writing process— whether in journals, theoretical memos (Richardson, 2000), or the research paper intended for dissemination—often requires hours of effort and multiple revisions over time before sense is clear to the author. The editorial process, including peer review, may lead to further efforts at sense-making.

The journal entry featured in the previous section also illustrates the first stage in making sense through writing. I gave explicit attention to what was occurring in class, particularly teacher candidate learning as expressed in exit card feedback and the ways in which learning was reflected in their presentations. This sense-making from the previous week informed my planning of that day’s lesson and, in turn, exit card and observational data from that class informed my work over the course of the term and in the year that followed. In an article published on this work, I concluded:

This article acknowledges that social justice work in teacher education is complex and challenging. Through the self-study process, I have identified some of the inherent tensions and ways in which advocacy for social justice can be balanced with attention to the identities and experiences of teacher candidate, including those from more privileged backgrounds. My experiences during this study suggest that teacher candidates are receptive to discussion of social justice issues, particularly when their initial resistance is respected and range of inclusion approaches are offered. By addressing social justice issues with teacher candidates in a relational manner, teacher educators model respect and empathy while contributing to making schools safe and supportive space for students across the diversity spectrum. For me, being vulnerable, relational, inquiry-oriented and responsive led to positive and safe experiences for teacher candidates. Yet effective teacher education lies in the tension between desirable attributes, so I must constantly be vigilant to ensure a balance among the attributes noted by Berry as teacher candidates and the times are always changing. (Kitchen, 2020, p. 22)

This sense-making continues as I now focus my attention on self-study as a School and Society instructor on how my relative privilege has informed and continues to inform my practice.

## ***Making the Writing Seem True***

The self-study literature places great stock in demonstrating trustworthiness (LaBoskey, 2004), often through triangulating multiple qualitative methods or engaging with critical friends or students. Russell and Menna (2017), in their review of 65 studies presented at the 10th international self-study practices conference in 2014, estimated that “about 40% of the papers mentioned but failed to address[this] essential criterion of self-study research” (p. 115). As an author of one of the papers that did not explicitly address these criteria, I had both positive and negative responses to Russell and Menna’s review. On the positive side, it prompted me to make my subsequent contributions more rigorous and trustworthy by highlighting multiple data sources and making evident my collaboration with students and critical friends.

On the other hand, I am concerned that placing great emphasis on rigour and trustworthiness diminishes the importance of making sense of lives through narrative constructions (Richardson, 2000). A self-study that draws from narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) or autoethnography (Holman, Adams & Ellis, 2013)—e.g., unpacking stories of experience in classrooms or making sense of personal identity over time—cannot be evaluated solely on criteria adapted from formalistic models of research. It also needs to be evaluated as expression of reality: “Does it seem ‘true’—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’?” (Richardson, 2000, p. 237). Does it create “a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response” (Holman, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 22)? Does it attend to “voice, signature, narrative form, and especially audience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 146)? As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, good narratives have an *explanatory, invitational quality*, along with *authenticity* and *plausibility*.

Below, I offer three journal entries as a narrative on how I began this line of inquiry on writing soon after the 2019 American Educational Research Association conference in Toronto:

I savored the beauty of the prose at an early morning AERA symposium session. As the first speaker read from her paper, based on a recently published book chapter, I was reminded of Laurel Richardson’s handbook chapter on writing as a form of research.

Later, a presenter described her Indigenous education course as “an impossible and imperative assignment” (Markides, 2019). This elegant phrasing perfectly captured her dilemma as a practitioner and helped the listener understand her decision. It was both artful and rang true. These two papers made me yearn for rich prose that brings self-study to life. (April 8, 2019)

I sit at my computer writing a literature review on societal privilege, notably white and male privilege, for a planned conference proposal and book chapter on my teacher education practices. I have read numerous articles and have grappled with this topic alongside my teacher candidates, yet the words do not fall trippingly off the tongue onto the page. I realize as I write that I need to more clearly differentiate between “unjust enrichment’ and “spared injustice.” I know, based on previous writing experiences, that the writing process deepens my understanding of concepts and the interrelationships among terms. I recognize that linking these terms to my own experiences will clarify matters for me and help the readers make sense in their lives. As I sit writing, I identify this as a possible conference paper.

I write on a piece of scrap paper “As I Sit Writing.” I then add a colon and “Writing as a

Cognitive Process in S-STEP.” I switch from my privilege paper draft to my journal and begin writing this entry. I feel confident that this would make a thoughtful S-STEP presentation... As I write this, I recall the work of John Loughran. I pull off the shelf *Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education*. I find underlined in my copy: “students of teaching need to be able to see and hear the pedagogical reasoning that underpins the teaching they are experiencing” (Loughran, 2006). So too, scholarly readers of academic books need to appreciate the reasoning that underpins the writing they are experiencing. They need to be metacognitive to become more effective writers about their practice. (April 12, 2019)

Mindful of Connelly and Clandinin’s (1988) observation that the better we understand our own stories “the more meaningful our curriculum will be” (p. 11), I try to make explicit my lived experiences in order to offer guidance to readers. (April 12, 2019)

I propose that such writing, even without interaction with students or critical friends, can ring *true*. I also invite readers to consider this as a credible account and explanation of the writing process. It invites the reader to consider their own writing process through authentic experiences rendered plausible through good writing.

In writing self-studies, whatever the topic, it is important to go beyond accurately representing the research study findings to crafting the words to make them seem true. While transactional writing is “a lot safer than expressive, according to Colyer (2013, p. 369), “expressive writing leads to purposeful action” (p. 366). More importantly, the two need not be mutually exclusive as good content can be rendered more expressive and engaging.

### ***Crafting for the Reader***

Crafting writing for the reader is a layered, multidimensional process. First, as writing is a method of knowing, it is important to attend to the craft of writing, not just to the reporting of findings or meaning. Richardson (2000) highlights the importance of metaphor and creative analytic writing practices, which may be developed through experiments in poetic representation, memory work, layered texts, and reflexive accounts. Second, as historian Barbara Tuchman (as quoted in Richardson, 2000) wrote, the “writer’s object is—or should be—to hold the reader’s attention... I want the reader to turn the page and keep on to the end” (p. 942). In the case of S-STEP, we need to consider what interests teacher educators and, particularly, those interested in studying their practice. We need to craft texts that resonate with their experiences and that address their big questions. Third, we need to craft our texts with “ongoing scholarly conversation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 167) in mind, which involves knowing one’s discourse community or communities. It also requires us to understand different mediums within a community. For example, a paper crafted for the Castle conference may be conversational and exploratory. An article aimed at a teacher education journal may be crafted more formally and be narrowly focused on a particular study of practice; *Studying Teacher Education* may offer flexibility in modes of discourse, but its criteria are also bounded by conventions of qualitative research. A chapter in a self-study volume may offer more flexibility in writing and allow for thematic connections across multiple experiences or studies. There are perennial tensions as we struggle to be true to ourselves and our research texts while connecting to audiences, and as we seek to push boundaries while not stretching them beyond what will reach audiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Reflecting on my beliefs on writing as a method of inquiry, I noted in my writing journal:

My approach to writing is guided by an image of the reader. When teaching essay writing as a secondary school teacher, I asked students to imagine that I was not paid to read their work, and that they needed to hook me in from the opening paragraph. In my academic writing, I try hook the reader in with a quotation or connection to an interesting issue, rather than start by stating my purpose. (May 7, 2019)

This is reflected in the wording of the introduction to this chapter, which I captured in my writing journal several minutes later:

The Castle Conference theme reflects my perspective that self-study is a craft and, at its best, an art. The metaphor of textiles and tapestries implies that our work ranges on a continuum from functional to well-crafted to artistic. In order to ‘envision new ways of knowing’ it is necessary to effectively employ structures, words, and literary devices of literature. Indeed, it is primarily through such expression that we as researchers and practitioners share our ways of knowing. My process in crafting these sentences is interesting in two respects. First, I took the time to construct my words and thoughts in a manner that might be of interest to colleagues judging the merits of the manuscript in relation to the stated theme of the conference. Second, I relied not just on argument, but on the literary device of metaphor to engage the reader. In revising my proposal into a chapter, I riffed off the conference metaphor. I looked up the terms textiles, tapestry, artisan, artist and yarn to render my paper relevant to the theme. I distinguished between textile as a basic functional term and tapestry as a more artistic version of the same. By doing so I offered my chapter on writing as a way of envisioning our ways of knowing. I moved beyond mere function to thoughtful crafting, to something ‘artful’ even if it does not rise to the level of art (January 30, 2020)

In introducing ideas and approaches, I am especially mindful of the power of careful crafting with the general reader in mind. As I recalled in my writing journal:

Several years ago, I was asked to write a chapter queer theory in the self-study of teacher education practices. While I had read the literature, I certainly did not consider myself a theorist, let alone a queer theorist. Indeed, I found much of the literature dense, exclusive and esoteric. My self-appointed task was to understand the literature well enough to be able to craft explanation that were understandable first to myself and ultimately to general readers. I wrote in my conclusion, “I have drawn on my experiences as an educator and teacher educator to demonstrate that queering the gaze can help teacher educators think new ways about their identities and practices” (Kitchen, 2016). I drew on stories of my own in order to make the literature more accessible and inviting. When dealing with theory or methodology, in particular, I see myself as a curator helping the reader to grow from the experience. (December 14, 2019)

This is not always easy, as I discovered recently as I ought to explain ontology and epistemology for an upcoming chapter on self-knowledge (Kitchen, 2020b). Fortunately, insightful editors guided me towards writing that was better crafted.

## Conclusion

Writing is the main medium through which we disseminate our self-studies of teaching and teacher education practices. The artful use of this medium contributes greatly to the effectiveness of the message. Thus, it is wise to consider Richardson's (2000) claim that writing should be regarded as a *method of inquiry* in qualitative research and should be employed as painstakingly as other methods in our research.

In this chapter, I have drawn on my journals and other work to reflect on four aspects of writing: (1) Value of Notes on Research/Practice; (2) Making Sense through Writing; (3) Making the Writing Seem *True*; and (4) Crafting for the Reader. It is my hope that my musings and writing artifacts prompt readers to (re)consider writing as a process, method of inquiry, and means of evoking response and action among teachers and teacher educators.

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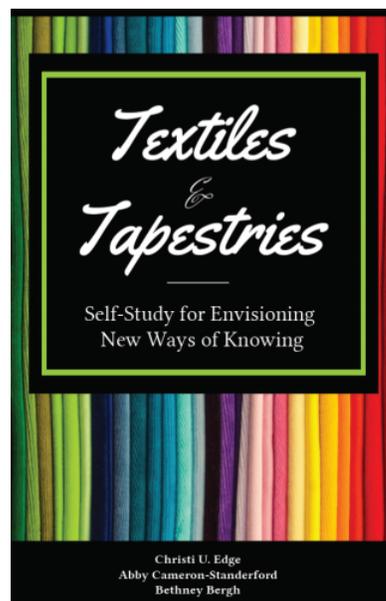
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