

# **S-STEP in Comparative and International Education**

## **Comparative Ethnographic Narrative**

Edward R. Howe & Georgann Cope Watson

Over the past 30 years, my classroom routines and teaching strategies have evolved considerably to embrace transcultural curriculum, teaching, and learning. Nevertheless, I continue to use many pedagogies that have proven effective over the years (or so I think). Approximately half of my teaching career has been in teacher education, where I have rarely taught courses drawing from my education and experience in comparative and international education (CIE). So, I was thrilled to finally teach a course with a CIE focus. I want this graduate course to be my signature course — the one that I will be remembered for. It is an opportunity for me to hone my teaching skills while reigniting my passion for the two areas of research that have been my main interests for more than two decades: teacher education and CIE.

After carefully crafting my syllabus, I wondered... Is this course useful to international students? How can I engage these students, mostly from India and China? From my teaching experience abroad, I came to be fascinated by CIE. Do these students feel the same way? How can I facilitate their learning? How can S-STEP and a critical friend help me to improve my teaching of CIE? These are the research questions framing this self-study.

I enlisted the help of an S-STEP critical friend, Georgann Cope Watson, who is also teaching in our graduate program. Georgann is familiar with our students and has conducted her own S-STEP research, reflecting on the challenges she experienced associated with teaching a diversity course from her privileged social position to a diverse group of students (Cope Watson, 2018). While this paper is written in the first person, her voice is embedded throughout as a sort of subconscious awakening. I am thankful for her significant contributions to this self-study. For, “[a] critical friend acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional learning experience” (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 107).

## **Conceptual Framework: Comparative Ethnographic Narrative (CEN)**

My CEN approach (Howe, 2010) to S-STEP is well-aligned with LaBoskey’s (2004) criteria of self-study: “it is self-initiated and focused; it is improvement-aimed; it is interactive; it includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods; and it defines validity as a validation process based on trustworthiness” (p. 817). I am determined to go beyond story-telling (Loughran, 2010). Moreover, I embrace the notion that “self-study researchers need to move beyond individual stories in which they have made a reflexive turn and toward an explanation of how such a turn changes their practice and contributes to research more broadly” (Bullock & Percy, 2018, p. 21).

Dewey (1938) and Connelly and Clandinin (1988) have greatly influenced my thinking. Furthermore, Schwab's (1983) curriculum grounded in four commonplaces: teacher, learner, subject matter, and milieu, also strikes a chord with me as a practitioner. In addition, international narrative inquiry scholarship highlighting the importance of cultural context nurtures my evolving conceptual framework (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010; Trahar, 2011). Specifically, as a teacher educator, I use narrative inquiry in both my teaching and research (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Huber, J., Caine, Huber, M., & Steeves, 2013; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Xu & Connelly, 2009). Narrative research collaborations have become a seminal part of my work (Cope Watson & Howe, 2020; Howe & Arimoto, 2014; Howe & Xu, 2013).

S-STEP research complements narrative inquiry (Kitchen, 2009; Kosnik & Beck, 2010; Loughran, et al., 2004). Craig (2008) eloquently pointed out the origins of self-study in the seminal work of Joseph Schwab. Indeed, self-study has proven a natural fit for teacher educators (Loughran, 2007).

## Objectives

In keeping with the Castle Conference theme of Self-Study for Envisioning New Ways of Knowing, in this paper, I critically analyze my teaching of graduate students in a new graduate course in Comparative and International Education through S-STEP with the help of a critical friend. In addition, I explore CEN as another way of knowing within the S-STEP space.

## Methods

Comparative ethnographic narrative (CEN) is a blend of reflexive ethnography (Etherington, 2006) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Essentially, CEN is a collaborative narrative inquiry—*comparative* (as it involves comparing one's experiences with others); *ethnographic* (in situ, long term participant-observation); and *narrative* (incorporating peer to peer extended conversations). It is a form of self-study, joint auto-ethnography, or other forms of collaborative, interpretive research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Loughran, 2007). This self-study builds on previous transcultural research using CEN (Howe, 2005a, 2005b; Howe & Xu, 2013). CEN unearths rich, descriptive narrative data. The CEN cyclical process of telling stories, reflecting on stories and re-telling stories with co-researchers or a critical friend, helps facilitate interpretation and deep analysis, to uncover lived experiences.

Narrative inquiry is an effective approach to recover and reconstruct personal practical knowledge through an exploration of "images, personal philosophies, rules, practical principles, rhythms, metaphors, and narrative unity" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 59). Knowledge is a narrative construct, which references the totality of a person's personal practical knowledge gained from formal and informal educational experience (Xu & Connelly, 2009, p. 221). Naturally, teacher educators use storytelling in their personal and professional lives. Thus, it is an integral part of my curriculum, teaching and learning.

Upon ethic review board approval from our university, I collected data on my teaching in the fall of 2019. Weekly reflections and *teacher-to-teacher conversations* with my critical friend resulted in more than 50 pages of data, including several pages of text per lesson, detailed student feedback, photos, and audio files. In early January, long after I finished grading research papers, the course evaluation arrived in my email inbox, completing my set of data — prompting me to begin my data analysis in earnest. As I analyzed the text, with my multi-coloured highlighters in hand, I re-

discovered themes that had emerged over the 13 weeks of classes. While I am reluctant to label these themes, and many of them cross boundaries, I found Creswell's (2018, p. 197) expected, surprising, and unusual framework helpful.

In this S-STEP, I wrote detailed weekly reflections on my teaching of a new course in an e-journal for 13 weeks. In addition, I reflected on written feedback from students, at the end of each class and at the end of the term through course evaluation. I shared my reflections with a critical friend via email and in person or by phone bi-weekly. Then, together we made meaning from them. Interpretive data was coded into expected, surprising and unusual themes (Creswell, 2018, p. 197). Thus, the research text evolved from our *teacher-to-teacher conversations* (Howe, 2010; Yonemura, 1982). My critical friend helped me to confirm and verify that these were the most meaningful themes amongst the many interesting reflections made.

## **Outcomes**

Expected themes included startup routines, classroom management, time management, groupwork, Moodle, information technology, and assessment/evaluation. Surprising themes pertained to the following: cultural context; international students; bi-polar nature of the classroom and subsequent focus on India and China in discussions; and most significantly my transformative teaching strategies resulting from S-STEP. Some unusual themes identified were: differences in student feedback online versus on paper; critical response questions as a means to promote both online and in-class discussion; variations on traditional *Think-Pair-Share* teaching strategies; S-STEP as micro-teaching; and Indigenous pedagogies and games as a means to stay on-task and off devices. I identified three major themes amongst the various sub-themes: 1) classroom management; 2) international students, and 3) transformative teaching strategies dealing with the changing cultural context. This self-study is the first step in my evolution as a novice S-STEP researcher.

Clearly, it is beyond the scope of one paper or one study to address all the layers of my embedded teaching practices. So, I have decided to continue this study next year and every year afterward, as long as I continue to teach this graduate course in CIE. Thus, in this paper, I wish to focus on examples that highlight how this self-study has enabled me to improve my classroom management, better understand our international students and develop transformative teaching strategies dealing with the changing cultural context. What follows are three edited reflections from Day 6, Day 10, and Day 11 to illustrate my growth, the depth of analysis, and the significance of outcomes for my teacher education practice. I include some student feedback in addition to comments from my critical friend.

### ***Day 6 October 9, 2019***

Today's lecture and reading were closely tied together as it is a presentation modified from the talk I gave at a conference in 2013 and paper published a year later. I explained to the students that just like artists who play their "greatest hits" to audiences, while I am passionate about global citizenship education, I was getting a bit tired of saying the same things over and over... I said that back in 2013, it was cutting edge to talk about plastics in the ocean and sustainability but nowadays, it was rather well-known. Also, I told students I was more interested in hearing what they had to say, so I skimmed over some of the slides in order to allow more time for discussion. I did this deliberately. Rather than actually cutting the slides, I prefer to keep them in place, as students can read them over on their own time, instead of listening to me drone on! In any case, I think I covered the most important points, leaving plenty of time for discussion. I paused at some slides and asked students to recall the

details of the case studies outlined in the paper. This was effective in checking if they had read the paper or not! As some of the data is a bit dated, I asked students to check the CIA World Factbook for recent data. It was a teachable moment about how important it is to update your data. One student was quickly able to find the answers. He called them out and I wrote them on the board.

Ahead of class, I copied the paper and decided to break the class up into 7 groups for a jigsaw summary of the reading, similar to last time, with each group being asked to summarize a different section of the paper and using the whiteboards. I told students that teachers are often faced with choices like, “do I let the students choose their own groups, or do I randomly assign them to groups or do I simply go with their online discussion groups?” I decided to let them vote for either 1) Random or 2) Same as Online Groups. The students unanimously chose 2). I said, while it is sometimes good to work with new people, I would respect their wishes.<sup>1</sup> So, they quickly got to work as I handed out materials.

It is noteworthy that students are chatting away in their own languages during this activity. So, I have no way of knowing if they are on task or not, other than I can see that they wrote their summaries on the whiteboard, which were generally well done. Most groups filled the whiteboard space. As I was concerned about spending too much time asking each group to present their summaries, I decided to simply underline one word or phrase in each summary, and then I asked them to please form a sentence that captures the essence of that word. I chose words like “transformational teacher” or “social justice” or “equity” and so on. I really liked how this worked. With a little thought, weaker students were able to provide a sentence. I would like to use this teaching strategy again.

After the break, as is our routine, we had a student presentation. At the end of the presentation, we were asked to form a circle and to answer 2 questions. So, we went around the circle twice. While some students chose to “pass” almost everyone participated and expressed their opinions.<sup>2</sup> My only criticism from today’s lesson is that once again our discussions tended to focus on “Chinese education problems” and “entrance exams” and so on. I need to find ways to steer the conversations away from simply complaining about China (or comparing China with India as to which is tougher on students). One of the best aspects of today’s lesson is that all students were able to participate fully and they were actively engaged. In fact, the student presentation on the UK, helped to facilitate that. Below are the 2 student feedback responses from Moodle:

So wonderful to watch the video. But if that possible, could you please add subtitles, sometimes just hearing can be hard for international students to understand. (S1) [Note: Today’s student presentation had a YouTube clip with English sub-titles.] Enjoying the classes more day by day, Thank you! (S2)

1 Critical Friend Comment: I wonder if this should depend on graded assignments, where students have autonomy and choice to decide who to work with, and with non-graded learning activities you could create groups for collaborative knowledge sharing.

2 This is the talking circle? I haven’t tried it yet. Think about the ways it might speak to your philosophy of teaching and align with the way you want to honour voice.

## **Day 10 November 6, 2019**

Today I decided to cut my lecture in order to make the class more student-centred. So, we devoted the first half of the class to a new jigsaw activity. We spent the first 10 minutes in an anticipatory set. I explained that each group would identify a theme from our reading, each group member would use a different coloured highlighter to select evidence from the reading to support the theme, and then each student would write a critical response to that theme. I asked for suggestions how to form groups of 3. The teacher domestic student suggested we use our birthdays as an ice-breaker and then to line up in order from January to December. So, I asked them to line up and I went “A, B, C” and so on. I instructed group A to sit at the tables at the front, B at the next group of tables, and C, D, E, and F in a clockwise manner. I asked one student from each group to come up and gather materials.

I am pleased with this new activity. While the students were busy, I thought carefully about how to present their work. I decided to tie into the “bridging gaps” metaphor. So, rather than going with the tree branches idea, I went with a bridge (see Figure 1). This is an example of how something that was originally planned one way got changed mid-lesson. I had been thinking to use the bridge as it is the first slide in my presentation, but until I got to the class, I had not thought about how the students would actually display their work in a cohesive way. On the left, I wrote *Theory, Research, University* and on the right I wrote *Practice, Teaching, and K-12*. I asked students to help me generate these *false dichotomies*. I then added *West* and *East* to my image and a bridge between. I wrote A, B, C, D, E, and F on the whiteboard to indicate where each group was to place their work. I gave students about 45 minutes to do this task. We spent about 10 minutes going over their themes. I then quickly went through my slides to share some of the images with them and some of my reflections. Overall, I think this lesson was effective. I might change a few things next time. I am not sure there was much meaning attached to the ribbon down the centre of the page, other than me calling it a “support” for our bridge. It did look something like the supports in the image on slide one. But the brown construction paper was perhaps not the best choice. Maybe it would make more sense to have blue for water? I did not give much thought to the colours. Well, in fact, I chose brown as it is a good contrast to the white paper for cutting and pasting and it is in keeping with an earth/tree theme. It will be interesting to see what students have to say about this jigsaw activity. They seem to like doing different things. What students do not like cutting and pasting? It seems students appreciated the jigsaw activity as shown in their comments:

Honestly speaking it was a great opportunity for me to reflect on authors’ transcultural experiences. It was creative n joyful method to do in class. (S1)

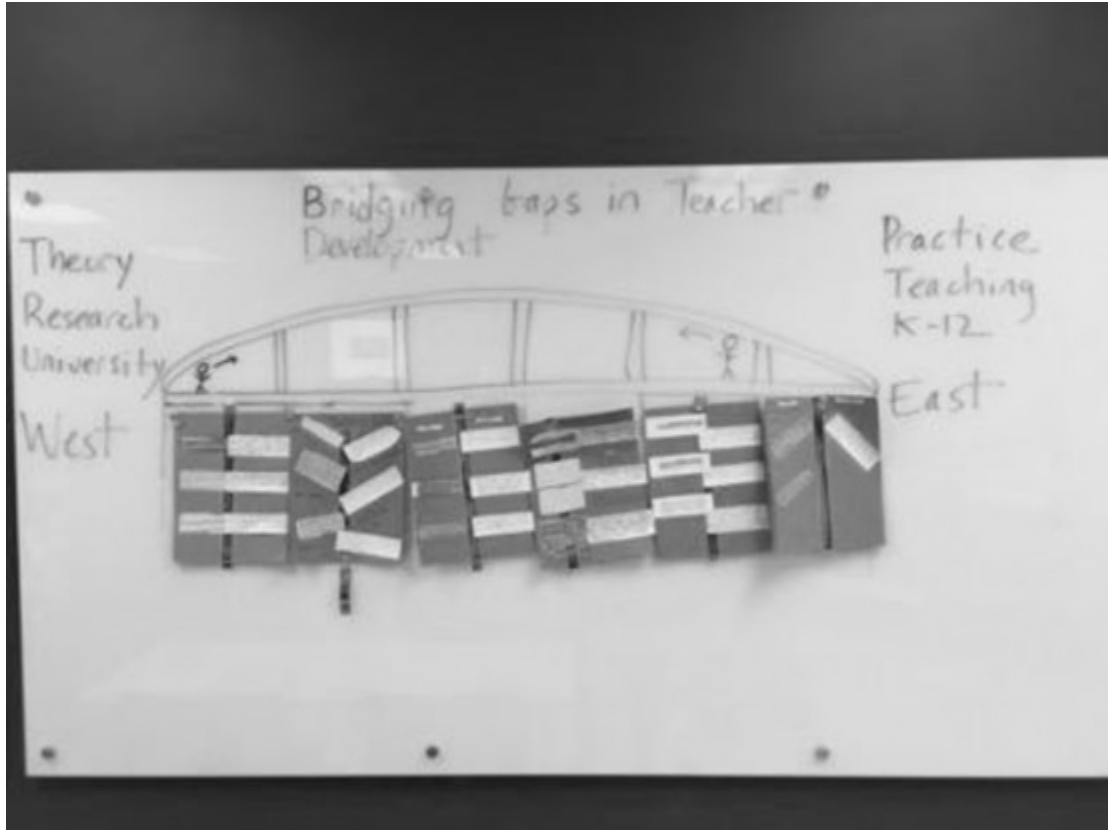
I would like to appreciate the small group activity to give us an opportunity to reflect our own experiences and also by relating our experiences with the authors. (S2) Jigsaw activity is informative and thought-provoking. (S3)

I was little nervous when it was my first class of this course in Sept. but now I love this class because of the congenial environment you have created!! And today’s activity was again awesome... Thanks to you! (S4)

I felt the lesson was effective. Always good to have an alternative means of expressing our knowledge of the readings, both to keep things fresh and to give us future educators another tool in our toolbox. (S5)

## Figure 1

### *Bridging Gaps in Teacher Development Jigsaw Activity*



### **Day 11 November 13, 2019**

I placed materials at each table and wrote today's agenda on the whiteboard as well as "Please sit in the same groups as last day!" I put up 2 poster examples and used the Doc Cam for my own educational chronicle example showing both life events and formal educational experiences on a timeline. I let students know that I had deliberately placed materials at the tables, to signal to them that we would be starting with a group activity. I explained that this is a teacher strategy and that I was trying to "lead by example" to show them ways to effectively manage the class. I mentioned that I wanted them to work in heterogeneous groups of 3. I also said that this might take them out of their "comfort zone" as they might have to work with others besides their friends. Despite my efforts though, while there were some groups of 3, I saw a Chinese student all alone and when 2 Indian students arrived late, they formed their own group of 2. So, this compounded problems in terms of grouping. But I think the real issue is that many of these students are not comfortable working with others outside their own ethnic group. I see a strong resistance from both Chinese and Indian students to mix. And this is rather surprising to me as these students are nearing the end of their coursework. They have taken a number of classes together. They are like a cohort. They all know one another!

I told them that it was unacceptable to be alone or in a group of 2. So, the lone Chinese student

joined another Chinese group, making a group of 4 rather than joining the 2 Indian students, seated right by her. When I questioned that, they all piped in that there were 2 other students coming. Indeed, they did arrive and with 17 students, we have to compromise with two groups of 4 (ie.  $3 \times 3 + 4 \times 2 = 17$ ). I quickly explained what we were doing and pointed to the examples. Students were instructed to create their own educational chronicles. I told them to reflect on their critical incidents and to share some of these with their group as they worked. Next, they were instructed to create a group poster with the river metaphor, with each of them represented as a stream, flowing into Thompson Rivers University (TRU). I told them that when done, they were to place their posters up on the whiteboard and to look at each others' during the break.

During the group activity, I circulated about and commented to students on their educational chronicles. This is a good way to get to know them better. I remarked that it was impressive that they could remember back to pre-school days. One student wrote about Cosplay. Another mentioned that most of her memories had to do with exams. Interestingly, one group chose Pikachu as a metaphor rather than the river.

This might be due to the fact, in my examples, some were not rivers. One was a tree. Seven students provided anonymous feedback via the Moodle feedback forum which I have found to be more immediate and far more effective than the course evaluations:

I appreciate the hands-on work of today's lesson. Instead of telling us about narrative inquiry, you allowed us to reflect on our own narrative journeys (with the river acting as an apt metaphor for a life's narrative) while engaging with the narratives of our group members. The variety offered in lesson delivery methods in this course is appreciated. (S1)

Wonderful activity (S2)

Great way of making the class interesting and keeping the students involved in studies in light hearted way... (S3)

I really appreciate the activity because it was kind of throwback of memories for me and I really like it. (S4)

This class was still my favorite part at the beginning, the game and the team cooperation. I like cooperation very much, because when I worked together to complete the task, I could clearly see my own deficiencies and the parts that I am

good at. I also know the strengths of other team members and learn. Besides, I can know more about my team members and develop friendships. (S5)

I have made more friends. This is more important than anything to me. I also enjoyed the group's presentation, and my classmates enriched my educational background in different countries. At the same time, I can also find a more suitable teaching method for my future. I think the important aspect of narrative inquiry is the reflection and find the connection. Class time is limited and reflecting. Maybe our reflection could start from higher education in next time. (S6)

Through today's event, I made a timeline of my own experience. Through lectures, learn





endeavour. Thus, I now see S-STEP has been part of my own conceptual framework all along.

My study is a modest attempt to improve my teacher education practices within the context of a graduate course in comparative and international education. The insights gained are particularly significant in light of increasing international student mobility and the changing multicultural nature of our classrooms in Canada and elsewhere. As many of my graduate students are from various nations, I am learning effective culturally relevant pedagogies. I look forward to sharing some of these with S-STEP colleagues via interactive presentations at Castle Conferences.

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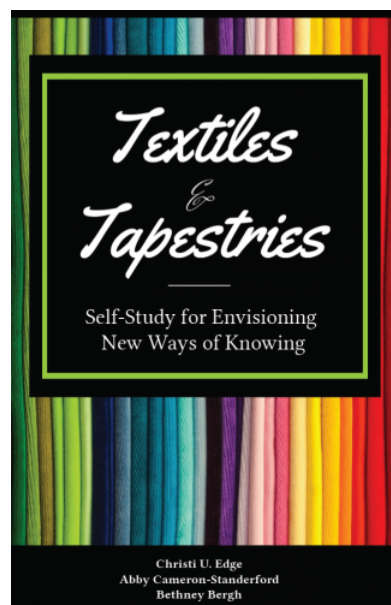
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