

# Weaving the Tapestry of my Academic Identity in Three Panels

## Personal History as Chronotopes, Reflection as Practice, and Praxis as Innovator

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“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom” -Aristotle.

As a first-generation college graduate student in the curriculum and teaching department of an R-1 midwestern college, I am acutely aware that I am actively engaging in renegotiating my academic and professional identity on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Chang et al., 2016). As a Nationally Board Certified secondary ELA teacher, I was predisposed to appreciate the power of self-study research as a form of personalized professional development and as an introspective examination of my teaching practice with the explicit goal of improving my practice (Schon, 1987; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Zeichner, 2007; LaBoskey, 2008). Critically evaluating one’s teaching craft demands ongoing engagement in intentional reflective practice-based study (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). Much like the process of how a skillful weaver guides the loom until the warp and weft threads form into an aesthetically pleasing tapestry that reveals a coherent story; my personal history, my practice, and my praxis have all coalesced into a fluidly evolving academic self-identity that is apprenticing under master educators (Abrams et al., 2014).

## Theoretical Background

In weaving a tapestry, the original design or cartoon is drawn on the fabric on the backside of the loom, forcing the weaver to work from the back. One way a weaver can view their progress while weaving is to look at the reflection through a mirror (Missaggia, 2013). Likewise, Bronkhorst (2013) uses the phrase ‘mirror data’ for student and observational feedback as it mirrors back to the practitioner what others see, but they cannot. Weavers use different colors, threads, fabrics, and tensions on the loom to obtain the desired result. Much like how weavers use tools of their trade to create a vibrantly colored, multidimensional picture out of a once-flat and colorless canvas, teacher educators use the tools of their trade (their experiences, pedagogy, and practice) to bring to life their vision of teaching, researching and knowing.

Currently, I situate myself along the Critical Theory paradigm, recognizing that ontologically my perception of reality is shaped by my values, society, media, and my social contexts (Villanueva & O’Sullivan, 2019). My learner and professional identity constructions are socially situated and dependent upon my communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Raggatt, 2014). Epistemologically, truth is intertwined with my current understanding of self and others against the backdrop of social justice, democracy, and Western ideology. My praxis pushes my pedagogy and

curriculum beyond the classroom walls and into other contexts and; hopefully, motivates my students to view education as the means to a more socially just world (Giroux, 2016).

My teaching is informed by socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), recognizing that we are all shaped, or colored, by our social interactions with others. Therefore, my self-study is grounded in socio-cultural theory, and as such, I believe all our interactions are socially constructed and capable of being shaped and reshaped by our perceptions and practices (Gergen, 2011; Scott & Palincsar, 2013). Samaras (2011), states self-study research is both personal and interpersonal, much like how the weft and warp threads are both present and necessary, but only one is visible from each side. Abrams et al., (2014), describe themselves as being “invited into apprenticeship as self-study practitioners and to move deeper into the center of practice by engaging in it”. Literary theorist Bakhtin (1981) has shaped my understanding of dialogism; especially utterances and multivoicedness in both my internal and external dialogical relationships and how they interact with both centripetal and centrifugal forces to constitute my personal chronotopes and my academic identity formation (Bakhtin, 1981;1984; Raggart, 2014).

As I ruminate over my transition from a first-generation high school graduate into a doctoral candidate, I recognize key critical incidents (Brandenburg & McDonough, 2017) and trajectory altering nodal moments (Tidwell et al., 2006) and explore how they have impacted my academic identity and practice (Henry, 2016; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). I find Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of chronotope and personal life history, and by extension, Hermans' (2001) dialogical self-theory, appropriate lenses to examine those decentralizing moments in my identity formation (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), as I slowly transition from peripheral to full participation in this new community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The development of teacher identity is an ongoing process and problematic as teachers must often reassign meaning to different perspectives and constructs, particularly those defining what it means to be a teacher educator in different contexts (Williams, 2013).

Just as our teaching is constantly in a state of flux and we are continually adapting our approaches to meet the shifting demands of our students, the post-modern, non-linear, and often disruptive nature of self-study is simultaneously liberating and terrifying. The freedom that self-study research grants me to tailor my methods, my narratives, my data analysis, and my theoretical approaches to fully capture my story, in a manner that is meaningful to me and; therefore, able to be shared with others is empowering (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015; Foot et al., 2014). However, the three cords of self-study, as identified by Samaras, Hicks, and Berger (2004) provide me with parameters to constructively focus my attention: self-knowing and the reforming of professional identity by looking back, modeling and testing effective reflection by looking at my present, and pushing the boundaries of my teaching by looking forward.

## **The First Cord: Self-Knowing and Reforming of Professional Identity by Looking Back**

Just as Catherine de' Medici's six-paneled *Valois Tapestries* (1576) was commissioned to capture her family at that moment in time, my self-study is also meant to capture my teaching practice and academic identity growth at this moment in time. This study sought to explore and elucidate how the three panels of my own tapestry have come together to create a new narrative; one that I hope will accurately represent the academic family trees of both my academic progenitors and my academic progeny (Liénard, 2018). My advisors have carefully interwoven their pedagogy into mine. They both

drew the outline of my doctoral journey onto my blank canvas and then handed the threads, the loom, and shuttle over to me to weave my own panels.

In alignment with the first cord of this self-study, self-knowing and reforming of identity (Samaras, et al., 2004), the overarching goal of this self-study was to discern if I have integrated the same empowering language and pedagogy of care into my practice as my mentors did; thereby providing my students access to possibilities that I was granted. In looking back and revisiting my nodal moments and articulating how they defined my academic identity; I hope to capture how those interactions transformed my thinking and lead to my current state of knowing. As I become more aware of other ways of knowing and what that may look like in both my students' lives and mine, I may have to re-examine my theoretical positions and adjust my practice accordingly (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014).

### ***My History as Personal Chronotope***

Just as many other first-generation college students before me, I experienced imposter syndrome (Perlus, 2019) until the third year of my undergraduate degree. That was when I encountered my first critical incident or nodal moment (Samaras, 2014). I was in the student union and overheard the freshmen sitting behind me discussing their first day of classes and feeling disoriented. Suddenly, I realized that as an upper-classman, I had mastered the social discourse of post-secondary education; I was not an outsider (internal I-Position as capable). I sensed I belonged in academia.

As a non-traditional student returning to college to earn a reading endorsement, I experienced my second critical incident and encountered the decentralizing conception of self and dialogical activity (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). My advisor suggested that I switch paths and earn a master's degree in literacy education instead of an endorsement. I explained it was intimidating enough just being a graduate student (external I-position as possible). Neither parent graduated high school, so it was inconceivable to me that I could get a graduate degree (internal I-position as unqualified). She persisted, and eventually, trusting in her words more than my own self-beliefs, I did. Her words, her utterances, enacted

Bakhtin's (1984) notion of "the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads" (p. 276). In insisting I earn a graduate degree (external I-position as intelligent), she was making those words, her vision of me, come alive and bringing me along with them (internal I-position as possibility). In this way, both my internal and external dialogues converged centripetally, and I was able to adjust my identity and accept her words (Hermans, 2013).

Towards the end of my program, I encountered my third, centrifugally disorienting, critical incident. My advisor and a colleague greeted me in her doorway and began to discuss how I was destined to get a PhD because I was an academic; I just did not know it yet (external I-Position as scholarly). I distinctly remember being unable to shift my eyes from the ethnography cartoon thumb-tacked to her doorway (Internal I-Position as fraud). The idea that I could earn a Ph.D. was unfathomable. I shared how my family was embarrassed that I was a college graduate as it was (internal I-Position as working class). At that point, she gave me the vision that I needed to embrace it for myself (External I-Position as scholar/researcher). She explained that once I was in a doctoral program, I would be surrounded by like-minded peers. My internal I-position allowed for the innovative and synthesizing work of the Promoter-Position to unify the discordant I-Positions and multiplicity of voices (Bahktin, 1984; Hermans, 2013). I would find my tribe; I would not always feel this isolated and misunderstood

(Internal I-Position as belonging).

As I continued to adjunct, she insisted I apply to graduate schools. It was then that I experienced my fourth critical incident. I had contacted several schools requesting information about their programs and usually a secretary responded. However, the professor from my current school (my future advisor) called to talk to me personally. She was warm, encouraging, and patient. She answered all my questions and offered her guidance. She said I was wise to begin my search early, I should ask as many questions as I needed, and I should apply wherever my strengths would be honored. I confessed that I had no idea what I was doing but felt compelled to at least start the process (Internal I-Position as outsider). She graciously reviewed most general application procedures and offered to answer any other questions I might have, even if they were not about her school or her program. Sometime during that phone call, I stopped being intimidated (internal I-position as hopeful). I knew, at some visceral level, that if there were kind and supportive advisors like her in other colleges, my first advisor was correct: I would find my tribe (External I-Position as confident academic).

Research consistently reports that a strong graduate student and faculty advisor relationship increases student retention and boosts the likelihood of graduating. Curtin, Malley and Stewart (2016) add “Doctoral training is characterized by a strong emphasis on the apprentice relationship of the emerging scholar with her or his more senior faculty advisor” (p.716). My current advisor reminds me of the weaver’s loom comb. The loom comb presses the threads firmly down into the previous row of thread so that the tapestry weave is tight and the panel is strong.

She shares her insights and experiences freely, she checks in on my health and well-being, and she keeps me focused on my program and goals (I-Position as a valued/supported). Similar to my first advisor, she speaks words of hope and potential. She frequently states that she knows, without a doubt, that I am going to write books, publish articles, and change lives (External I-Position as agent of change). She does not say if; she says when (Internal I-Position as participant in community of practice).

In every exchange I have with her; I leave feeling cared for, respected, and strengthened. My internal and external I-Positions move closer to agreement with each interaction and my identity as a teacher educator becomes more defined (Williams, 2013). I am reminded, once again, of Bakhtin and his concept of how “the fabric of language supports efforts to understand the ways in which utterances—even those that support conflicting beliefs—are crucial elements in meaning making. An utterance “cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (p. 276). Again, her words, her utterances, and our ongoing dialogue about my possibilities continue to more clearly craft my identity and potential self.

## **The Second Cord: Modeling and Testing Effective Reflection by Looking at my Present**

As I make my teaching transparent in the hope that my pedagogy, practice and praxis are aligned, I question my assumptions. Are my students seeing congruity between my theory and practice? Am I meeting the expectation of the second cord of this self-study and modeling effective practices and self-reflection? Am I taking any risks and testing any new approaches? How can I truly know myself as a practitioner unless I allow those I teach a voice (LaBoskey, 2008)? As a novice teacher educator at a flagship university, I am expected to mentor and to model effective teaching practices and pedagogy for my students. This self- study provides me with evidence to corroborate or refute my

perception of my practice (Loughran & Berry, 2004). Equally important is the belief that I am speaking the same words of hope and empowerment into the lives of my students as was spoken into mine. As weavers share their craftsmanship by publicly displaying their tapestries for others to view and critique, I can share my craft by displaying my practice to others for viewing and critiquing, (Elliot-Johns & Tidwell, 2013; Mena & Russell, 2017).

## Methods

My study is a combination of personal history self-study (Samaras, Hicks, and Berger, 2004) and a self-study of practice. I am exploring the key moments throughout my academic journey that informed my professional identity and influenced my pedagogy development (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2009; Mena & Russell, 2017). Pitthouse et al. (2009) state “the self-reflexive process of writing these [stories] can serve as a catalyst for action.” (p. 51). Delong (2019) addressed the vulnerability of self-study when she created a culture of inquiry; “a safe, supportive space wherein practitioner-researchers are enabled to share their vulnerabilities, to make explicit their values, and to hold themselves accountable for those values” (p. 65). My critical friend is sensitive to the vulnerability inherent in accessing another practitioner’s intimate thoughts and narratives; therefore, we too have established our own culture of inquiry. Her insights and expertise as a former teacher, life-long mentor, and teacher educator allow her to evaluate my teaching practice and data set as an expert and grants her license to challenge my interpretation of the data without creating tension (Schuck & Russel, 2005). I trust her judgment completely.

LaBoskey’s (2004) five elements of conducting self-study guided my decisions for this section: initiating the study, identifying my practice in order to improve my pedagogy, examining my conceptions about my teaching, using multiple qualitative methods, and making my findings available to other educators and researchers. My critical friend functioned as an external examiner and was integral to the study by assuring the findings were accurate and trustworthy (Mishler, 1990; Mena & Russell, 2014). She was a National Board Certified Teacher, a curriculum developer and supervised student teachers at a teaching college. She reviewed the data gathered objectively and was able to identify different themes and patterns as they emerged, which ensured our findings were authentic and valid.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data set analyzed included: qualitative and quantitative student course evaluations, advisor’s written classroom observations and evaluations, emails, texts, informal student feedback, notes, cards, letters, instant messages, and personal reflections collected from January of 2014 (my decision to pursue a Ph.D.) until December of 2019. The print artifacts had been collected and stored in a file cabinet for personal reflection and as evidence, I honored student feedback and suggestions for course improvements. The digital artifacts were collected retrospectively via email searches and printed. There were almost 300 hundred artifacts gathered. The qualitative analysis procedures iteratively applied were thematic content analysis, grounded theory, and constant comparison method (Boeije, 2002; Kolb, 2012; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Vaismoradi, 2016). We decided the data should be separated into two sets: those relating to my advisors and me and those relating to my students and me. I completed my initial open coding, concept clustering, and identification of themes first, then gave the artifacts to my critical friend to analyze. To me, allowing the patterns to emerge and letting the data do the communicating is what makes self-study revelatory. I did not know what the data would expose, but I trusted that it would benefit my practice and improve student learning

My critical friend and I had similar techniques during open coding but had vastly different approaches to concepts clustering and labeling final themes. Originally, I identified twelve concepts for how I was mentored and eleven for how I mentor students, eventually narrowing them down to five themes each. She identified twenty-eight concepts for how I was mentored and thirty-one concepts for how I mentor students and she narrowed hers down to four themes each. We both began by reading communications and using stickie notes to list words or ideas as they became obvious. After I analyzed my data and determined concept clusters, I put it away for a week, and then revisited it to assure myself my interpretations were as accurate as possible. Next, I looked at what the concepts indicated and determined my final ten themes. She, on the other hand, put all her word lists and concepts into a spreadsheet, tallied them, and added clarifying notes. She eliminated redundancies and sought more vivid, inclusive vocabulary that better captured the essence of what she saw in the data. Finally, she collapsed her concepts into eight themes.

We met in person to discuss our approaches, held phone conferences to share our individual conclusions, defined our themes, emailed our findings, and then mutually agreed on the final list. The themes for my mentors were: cultivating relationships, possessing and acting on perceptions/insights, empowering, and knowledgeable/competent. The themes for how I mentored were: authentic/transparent. clarity of instruction, empowering, and supportive. Both of our findings were consistent except for enculturation. I had it as a final theme, but she had it nested under cultivating relationships. After reflecting on it and understanding her thinking, I agreed that it was appropriate.

## **Giving My Students a Voice**

When Berry (2007) discusses the tensions that are inherent in being a reflective teacher educator, she was more accurate than I wanted to admit. However, the findings indicate that my current teaching practice and praxis are consistent with how I was taught and mentored. Our student course evaluations are anonymous, allowing for honest feedback.

Surprisingly, the only negative comments or suggestions for change have been that I provide excessive resources and strategies, making it difficult to locate the essential content, that my speaking pace is too fast and I should slow it down, and that there are too many assigned readings. As a result, I have created separate folders for class materials and extra resources, I have asked one student each semester to prompt me to slow down if I get too animated, and I explained that scholarly reading is expected of pre-service teaching majors. Positive feedback has included comments about my passion for teaching, my transparency and vulnerability, how supportive I am, how confident they feel in their understanding of literacy strategies, and how safe they felt in my classroom. My students are not indicating that I am a perfect teacher educator or that there is no room for growth. However, they do affirm my hope that the study would reveal that my praxis and my pedagogy of care and concern are evident to them.

## **The Third Cord: Pushing the Boundaries of My Teaching by Looking Forward.**

Now, I turn to the third cord of the model—pushing the boundaries of my teaching in innovative ways. This self-study has reassured me that my praxis and growth as a teacher educator are maturing; therefore, I am feeling empowered to experiment with more innovative teaching approaches. I am a third-year doctoral student teaching two sections of content and disciplinary

literacy. When it was originally assigned to me, my advisor provided me with her syllabus and materials to use an outline. Although I was given permission to design the course however I chose; I was not yet ready for that level of autonomy. I opted to follow her syllabus outline with minor preferential changes. Now, I am redesigning my course using the practice-based teaching model as my framework; I am intrigued by possibilities for students as they enact their teaching practice as coursework (Forzani, 2014).

As a disciplinary literacy instructor, I have been frustrated that teachers are expected to use disciplinary literacy in their practice but there are no resources available for them to implement it without a significant time investment. Therefore, I am creating handbooks for each content area with mentor texts and exemplars of disciplinary literacy genres along with materials to guide students as they conduct genre studies and identify key elements. I have contacted the authors of three disciplinary literacy texts I find useful and they have given me permission to use their content in my handbooks. My students have been honest and shared that although they appreciate the value and potential of disciplinary literacy to deepen student learning, they lack the background knowledge and confidence to create their own lessons.

However, if I provide them with the resources to seamlessly implement disciplinary literacy in the appropriate units, they have assured me they will use them. I am pushing the boundaries of my teaching in ways that leave me concurrently excited and inert. I am leaving what is familiar and proven, to step out into the unfamiliar and untested. I am optimistic but cautious.

## **Final Thoughts**

As I survey my academic journey, I find I am still holding strands of thread from many of my former teachers as they, too, have left their imprint on my practice. Each one of them, in their own way, has woven their threads of knowledge and pedagogy through the tapestry of my teaching. Now, as I look forward to my students, I am anticipating that I will positively influence their development and evolution as teachers. At this point, the data affirm that I am evidence of my praxis and pedagogy are clear in their correspondences. Their statements mirror mine when I leave my advisors: they feel validated, supported, and prepared to enter the field of teaching. Again, I return to Bakhtin. To him, “all language— indeed, all thought—appears as dialogical. This means that everything anybody ever says always exists in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. In other words, we do not speak in a vacuum. All language— and the ideas which language contains and communicates—is dynamic, relational, and engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world.” (Farmer, 1995).

May the words I speak to my students and knowledge I share with them enables them to create their own tapestry of knowledge, and may they, in turn, freely share their knowledge with their students. According to G, a student from last semester, I am.

G., writes, “I love how accommodating you are for your students and you fill me with joy when I think about being the same way for my *own* hard-working students. Thank you, thank you, thank you... for all you do.” (email-G. 12/16/2019)

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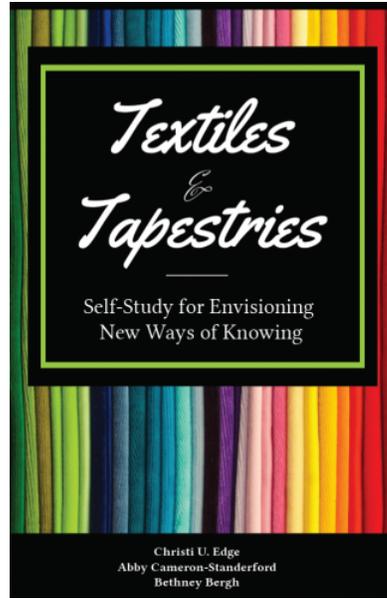
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