

# Knit 1, Purl 1

## Ravelling Stories of Leading and Learning

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My interest in knitting began with Kristi Fletcher’s mum. Looking for something to occupy my hands while watching my daughter play softball, I noticed her in the stands knitting needles in hand. Intrigued, I asked her about what she was doing, and she began to teach me about the craft. My interest in partnerships in teacher education evolved as I moved from a position of arranging practicum placements to managing teacher education programs at my institution. Through my doctoral work, I have become increasingly interested in exploring the space created for collaboration when our teacher education programs are situated both on campus and in classrooms.

My study is located in a partnership between school district staff and our University Teacher Education Program. This partnership, called Link2Practice (L2P) supports teacher candidates’ learning with weekly full-day field experiences in school classrooms anchored by on campus classes during the remaining four days (Sanford et al., 2019). In addition, our candidates and practicing teachers in the district participate in professional learning afternoons as they engage in professional inquiry. The following quote from a school district staff member involved in the partnership captures its essence:

*We're continually seeking to understand what it is that's going to make a difference. And so, what drives us in our work, and in our classrooms is the idea of 'If not this, then what? And if it's not that, then what?' So, I was curious about what competencies we value in colleagues...and overwhelmingly collaboration came up, that idea of working together. It's about you're going to say something...to bring something to the table, I'm going to make some kind of connection and add to it, and so together it makes something much bigger than we could have come up with by ourselves. Which is what this work does... (Laura, district staff)*

This quote highlights the key attractor in my study, my desire to examine the collaboration between me and my participants to more deeply understand the practice of being a teacher educator through L2P. Metaphorically, this can be examined through the lenses of knitting and ravelling. The verb “to knit” has many meanings, including to grow together, to fit or work together, and to create a fabric by forming loops that are pulled through each other. The verb “to ravel” is a contronym; that is, a word that has opposite meanings. To ravel means both to tangle and disentangle. It is in these actions of creating, winding, unwinding, tangling and disentangling that I explore the partnership.

Situated as a doctoral candidate, teacher educator, and administrator within teacher education, I ravel and knit my responsibilities, exploring the academic and administrative work of teacher education, navigating its intricacies and conundrums whilst also inhabiting a role that requires management, structure and linearity. As a researcher, I am intrigued by self-study’s proactive stance.

Self-study recognizes that teachers' engagement in their own professional learning is crucial in developing understandings of self and improvements in practice (Mena & Russell, 2017; Samaras & Freese 2006). Sharing insights about oneself and one's practice supports the individual undertaking the self-study, empowers others to engage in self-study research, and contributes to the wider education community (Kosnik, et al., 2005; Vanassche & Keltermans, 2016).

Drawing on my knitting metaphor, I visualize interweaving my stories and the stories of my participants as a technique known as intarsia, a knitting method where the knitter introduces colour patterns in the work by incorporating yarns of different colours. The twisting of the yarn (sharing and connecting stories) is what ensures the knitting stays as one piece and enables patterns to emerge. How and when the knitter entwines these strands determines the pattern; in the same way, the researcher selects and connects strands of individual stories to reveal new understandings.

Using self-study, my research helps me ravel the question: How does working collaboratively with my participants inform me personally in my roles as researcher, teacher educator, and administrator?

## **Locating Myself in the Context—Informed by My Roles at the University**

I inhabit a strange world at the university where I work, simultaneously doctoral candidate, teacher educator and administrator. As a doctoral candidate, I have the privilege of researching about the work I do while I engage in the work, thus informing both my academic and administrator self. As Manager of Teacher Education, I am a staff member, not faculty. As a unionized staff member, I am in many ways protected, not needing to prove myself through appointment, tenure, promotion or my record of publication. However, I also have no vote at Department or Faculty meetings and serve *ex officio* on most committees and my research occurs outside of work hours. This unique tangle of roles and positions is an always-challenging collection of yarns to ravel as it informs and is informed by the work I do with field partners.

## **Informed by My Participants, Informing My Participants**

Four years ago, a local school district proposed a partnership with our Teacher Education Program. As described in Sanford et al. (2019), the Link2Practice partnership supports teacher candidates' learning through a weekly full-day field experience in classrooms bracketed by on-campus classes during the remaining four days. The school experience provides an opportunity for observation, professional conversation, working with students, and connecting with the life of the school. To further weave the work of teacher education between campus and schools, one course in the program is taught at the end of the school-based day by two school district educators.

The major assignment for the course is a professional inquiry, which supports our teacher candidates exploring a pedagogical question that intrigues them. As professional inquiry is part of the district culture of teacher learning, participating teachers are provided release time for two professional learning afternoons during the term. This time is designed for practicing teachers to share their inquiries with one another and with the teacher candidates, and for the teacher candidates to share their inquiry process with a professional audience. The L2P structure is in itself an intarsia, as campus and classroom learning and inquiry are knit together, allowing patterns to emerge through each week's experiences. Our candidates are encouraged to ravel—to tangle and disentangle the

themes, inconsistencies, and practical and theoretical learning they are experiencing.

I am interested in how this partnership contributes to my own understandings of working in teacher education. The act of leaning into the space between theory and practice, campus and classroom offers an opportunity to disrupt the binary and learn together (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001). The collaboration with field-based educators has provided rich data to inform my self-study as I also consider how this collaboration informs me as an administrator, teacher educator and self-study researcher.

As a teacher educator at my institution, I am situated amid the complexities and tensions of theory and practice. The collaborators in this self-study are me and five educators (teachers and district staff) from a local school district. Because my participants are located in either a school or in the district office, as they consider teacher education as it applies both to classroom learning and professional learning, they provide different perspectives to inform my study. This allowed our discussions to consider what teacher candidates are learning in school classrooms, campus classrooms, and professional learning sessions, and what we are learning about teacher education through these shared spaces.

My study began in June 2019 as we began to plan the fall 2019 iteration of L2P. During the eight-months of the study, I facilitated four focus groups with the participants. One of the focus groups occurred in June as we planned for the fall, two occurred during the fall, after the professional learning afternoons, and the final focus group was in January, at the conclusion of L2P. Each focus group was audio recorded and transcribed. In order to provide participants with another way to engage with one another and me, I used Google Classroom to post five on-line open-ended prompts to generate reflection and discussion. Finally, I examined and analyzed pertinent artifacts generated through the work of L2P (including presentation slides, emails, photos, and written reflections), and kept a reflective journal. In analyzing the collected data, I drew insights to inform my various roles—how self-study informed me as a researcher, our growing confidence as teacher educators, and how the partnership informed my work in teacher education.

## **Locating Myself As a Researcher—Informed by the Self-Study Community**

Loughran (2004) asks self-study researchers to consider questions “that are individually important and also of broader interest to the teacher education community” (p. 9). Critically examining teacher education supports both individual and collective learning. This orientation to my work, both as researcher and manager, has shaped my study as I work to improve both my understanding of self as educator and my understandings of how our program is informed by sharing the stories of our work together.

Integrating the work of self-study researchers (Barnes, 1998; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran & Northfield, 1998) Samaras and Freese (2006) consider five central characteristics of self-study research: it is personally situated inquiry, critically collaborative, focussed on improved learning, transparent and systematic, and it supports the generation of knowledge made public through presentation and publication (p. 40-53).

As an introduction to self-study research with my teacher partners, I posted the following quote in an on-line discussion as we began our work together:

For teacher educators to develop their teaching about teaching and to begin to make the problematic observable for their student teachers, they must publicly face the dilemmas and tensions of practice and develop ways of explicitly sharing and responding to these situations for their student teachers. Thus, there is an overarching need for teacher educators to pay attention to their own pedagogical reasoning and reflective practice and to create opportunities for their student teachers to access this thinking about, and practice of, teaching. (Loughran, 2005, p. 9)

From my participants' responses, I was intrigued by their use of self-study language without them being familiar with self-study methodology in any formal way. They identified "tensions, authenticity, observation, nuance, analysis, curiosity, reflection, identity and integrity, vulnerability, and being true to one's heart" as critical to the role of a teacher and teacher educator. One participant noted:

*It's hard to look in the mirror and say "something you're doing, mirror person...is getting in their way, or could potentially be getting in their way. You can't just keep blaming the kids because sometimes it might be something you're doing inadvertently, maybe you don't even notice it. It's that hard self-reflection that we have to do sometimes that people don't want to do. Who likes to do that? But it is part of teaching, because teaching is such an art and a science, right? It really is. It's that wonderful, hard, frustrating blend of scientifically based stuff and this nuance, and this je ne sais quoi. (Jeannie, district staff)*

## **Informed by My Critical Friend**

Self-study offers a space to consider the self-in-context critically. From this perspective, we are called to consider why we do what we do, and unbury our assumptions, often in collaboration with a critical friend (Placier, et al., 2005), a "trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend" (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 49).

My critical friend (a colleague at my institution) has helped me navigate terrains of researcher, teacher educator, and administrator. She has helped remind me that "The aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge and illuminate rather than confirm and settle" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). In my journal, I notice the words "Be critical" written in all caps and circled:

*K has encouraged me to be critical—something that is very difficult and challenging...partially because I don't want to criticize the partnership—we need them to continue this work! I'd like another word for it. Then I consulted a dictionary—critical means finding fault and judging with severity, but it also means 'to analyze evaluatively and to use careful judgement', 'vital to success' and 'judged worthy' (as in critical acclaim). Like the word "ravel", it is a contronym. This is helping me see being critical as central to what I am doing. It's still challenging, but I see its importance to this work. (July 31, 2019)*

My critical friend has not only provided the space “to ask the deep questions about our practice that we dared not ask alone” (Samaras & Freese, 2009, p. 13), she has also helped me ravel what those questions have unearthed.

## **Findings—What Am I learning?**

### ***The Course of My Self-Study Research***

In knitting, yarn follows a meandering path (a “course”), forming loops above and below the strand of yarn being used. This gives the work elasticity in vertical, horizontal and diagonal directions, allowing stretch in response to the wearer’s movements. In self-study, “rigor, in the sense of maintaining a critical stance towards one’s practices, can demand that self-study researchers negotiate, adapt, and change research methods, processes, and even the research questions as the study unfolds” (Tidwell, et al., 2009, p. xiv). Self-study responds to the wearer’s movements.

I had initially hoped to engage in a collaborative self-study, with us co-creating and co-designing the research. However, as my participants were all working full-time and not actively engaged in the research as co-researchers, I came to realize that this was self-study research informed by our collaboration rather than a collaborative self-study. What also emerged was that our structures (school district organization and university organization) inhibit sharing as deeply and naturally as I would have hoped. Our meetings occurred after our respective work days, and had to be carved out intentionally rather than organically (meetings were arranged weeks or months ahead).

Additionally, as three of the five participants work together in the district office, I found myself wishing I could capture what I imagined were more emergent conversations about their understandings of teaching and learning, located in a problem of practice rather than the conversations we were having. Indeed, they commented that:

*...we often say how lucky we are to be in this role because we can ponder...these ideas and bounce these things off of each other...because we just relish those kinds of conversations that are always just asking questions and always looking at how can we do better. (Laura, district staff)*

The structures of district and university tend to separate more than unite. Referring back to Samaras’ (2006) requirements of self-study, perhaps it is not surprising to find that although my participants were eager to help me with my research (“We want to make sure we are doing this right!”) the self-initiated, critical, and collaborative elements that improve the learning of self and self-in-context were likely emerging more naturally in their professional workplace interactions than in our more contrived conversations.

However, their organic interactions lack self-study research’s characteristics of transparent documentation and the generation and sharing of knowledge (Samaras, 2006) in that they regrettably remain largely undocumented and private, rather than the transparent, documented and shared research supported through self-study methodology. I see this as a critical tension in partnership work when so many rich conversations occur in our respective workplaces, unheard by the interested other.

## ***Developing Personal and Professional Confidence in Our Work***

Hopper and Sanford (2018) ask us to consider the importance of “nurturing professional confidence” (p. 242) in the collaborative work of teacher education. The theme of “confidence in our own voices” emerged through my data in three ways. The first was developing my own confidence in the work, as I reflected during a conversation:

*It wasn't that it was less challenging, or that they [teacher candidates] weren't puzzling about their [inquiry] questions but there seemed to be an understanding that teachers engaged in this as part of their learning...and I don't know if it's something to do with our confidence now, because I think the more you do things even though...it's always different because you're always with different groups, but there's a confidence in the process now, that there is a time when students are frustrated or confused...and so we just know that that's part of it and so we can speak to that better. But we've also had teachers who have been involved in the partnership for four years now...there's a sense that this is a shared experience...I think there was more trust in our leadership because we've worked together...I have confidence that there is a shared understanding and commitment to this project in all different ways... (Kerry, researcher)*

What I noticed was that the unravelling of our work (both in its tangling and disentangling) became part of the strength of the work, as I was able to acknowledge the complexities and nuances of teacher education rather than in seeing tensions as something to be avoided or minimized.

The way the second theme of professional confidence emerged was in supporting practicing teachers sharing their work with their colleagues and teacher candidates during professional learning afternoons. This was a central goal of the partnership—to build capacity within the school district for teacher leadership and to ensure this professional commitment was visible to our teacher candidates. Laura connected the capacity-building to their district’s focus on engagement through collaboration and innovative teaching and learning:

*...when you're in your classroom doing your thing, you think you're just like everyone else, and when somebody else says 'you should share this', you think 'isn't everyone doing this?' Well, no, they're not! And so, I think it takes somebody else to notice that...the more we can notice that in people and invite them to share, the better off we all are... (Laura, district staff)*

The third way that professional confidence was nurtured connects to Samaras and Freese’s (2006) notion that self-study must contribute to the wider community through presentation and publication. Sharing our work with the international self-study community, and bringing the work of self-study to my participants fostered their confidence:

*...and even to hear what you're doing, presenting at these conferences! We just think what we're doing in this district is interesting, but wow, that it's really worthy of study, and sharing on a larger international scale, and other people want to learn from it! (Laura, district staff)*

I echoed Laura's excitement about sharing our work. Bringing our work to the self-study research community allowed me, as a novice researcher, a chance to share with others committed to teacher education. I reflected in my journal:

*I was inspired by the S-STEP mentoring session at AERA. I felt warmly welcomed by people who think deeply about their work as teacher educators. I felt as though the whole conference was this series of doors that opened to these new communities for me, and inside each room was a crowd of people saying "Welcome! We're so glad you are here." And having the chance to present to an international audience about our work made me realize how important this local, emergent work is, and how important it is to share—to practice articulating my understandings...I feel a responsibility to bring the voices of my participants to this larger community. (June 25, 2019)*

Sharing these stories of nurturing professional confidence for myself and my participants is what I draw on for energy to sustain the research journey—described by one of my participants as:

*...having to really understand what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. I'm much more reflective and I hone in more on what I need to do and what I want to do to be better as a teacher...when I'm trying to help somebody else understand what I'm doing and I articulate that with them and the reason behind why I did that, then I just become more solidified in what I believe, and why I'm doing it. And if I can share that...with someone else, that might be the one thing that they take away. (Sheri, teacher)*

## **Shaping the Work of Teacher Education Forwards and Backwards**

Knitting produces a two-dimensional fabric made from a one-dimensional yarn. I had previously imagined teacher education as a strand of yarn extending in a one-dimensional direction (through our program into a career) as ultimately our goal as teacher educators is to support the development of teachers who enter the profession as engaged and reflective educators. For my participants, who are looking at our teacher candidates as future colleagues, our partnership enables them to connect to pre-service teachers right from the beginning of their program. Vivian, a senior district staff member responsible for professional learning in her district, articulated the need for pre-service teachers to see the role of teacher extending beyond their individual classrooms:

*And then I also appreciate that even for practicing teachers that a lot of the work that they do, if they're going to take risks in classrooms or learn how to differentiate, and all the important pieces that have to happen each year, what they needed was work with colleagues to improve their practices. What I really wanted to highlight was how important that is to teaching. That collaboration and continuously developing your professional learning is what makes teaching enjoyable, but also effective with students...how are we getting people into that profession and that identity, unless they're starting to do it right away and so and I was grateful that [the University] was open to trying that, because I think it's a crucial component... (Vivian, district staff)*

What is emerging in my own role is the second dimension, the knitting of the yarn back into my own work as teacher educator and to ensure my participants' perspectives and engagement in teacher education are evident in our conversations at the university. In my journal, I reflected on:

*the need to consider our programs both forwards and backwards and we need to continue these conversations seaming pre-service and in-service teacher education. We have much we can learn from one another, and perhaps our discourse is not so easily divided into "theory" and "practice" as I had initially thought. I feel privileged being part of this research, but also feel a responsibility to interweave these stories—to find ways to support sharing in our teacher education community. (November 14, 2019)*

## Conclusion

The aim of my self-study was to explore how collaboration in teacher education informed my various roles—as doctoral candidate, manager and teacher educator. From this experience, I have a better understanding about the nature of self-study research and how documenting the stories of my collaborators offered me new, and important insights. My findings indicate self-study allows for documenting the rich conversation in collaboration that often goes undocumented. Secondly, collaboration and sharing leadership nurtures our professional confidence as teacher educators. Finally, this collaboration reminded me of the need to work back and forth between the theory and practice of teaching, with each informing the other.

My research continues to inform my role as a knitter and raveller of what Zeichner (2005) describes as a disconnect between academic research knowledge of those at a university, and the lived experiences, practical wisdom and expertise of classroom teachers (Berry, 2008). I experience the weaving of these threads through my roles as researcher, teacher educator and manager. The university-district partnership provides a rich source of data to continue to inform my various selves about the work of teacher education. Self-study has helped reframe these snags and tensions as possibilities for continuing to study the practice of being a teacher educator.

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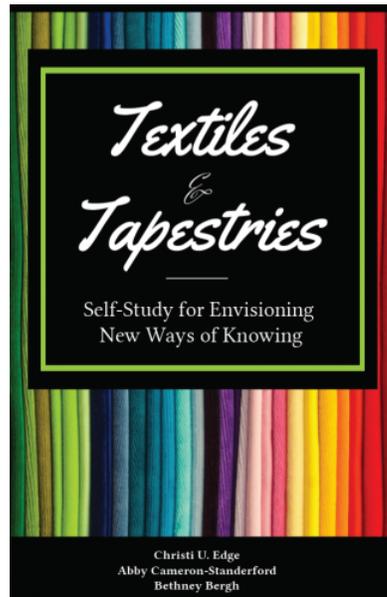
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