

# Learning together as teachers and researchers: Growing shared expertise in a self-study community of inquiry

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The authors of this study are 14 Dutch teacher educators who worked together as a self-study community of inquiry (COI) over one year. The aim of the group was to learn about, and facilitate, self-study research by participants in a planned and systematic way, within a supportive network. The project design was informed by a set of guidelines for supporting a self-study COI that had been articulated, refined and revised over several years. In this study, we revisit the guidelines, and in particular two recently added guidelines, as we sought to interpret and enact them within our COI.

## Introduction

In the Netherlands, it is common for teacher educators (TEs) to have a teaching-only position without a designated research allocation. However, in recent years, there has been increasing emphasis, both at the Dutch institutional and policy level, for more TEs to become involved in research. This stems from factors including university requirements that all academic staff hold a PhD, the push towards more research-based teaching, and the need for competent supervisors of pre-service teachers' research projects. However, many Dutch teacher education institutions lack a strong research culture and not all TEs embrace the idea of also becoming a researcher. Many of those who try often experience a tension between the institutional requirements for engaging in, and with, research, and their own needs, concerns and interests as teacher educators. Self-study of teacher education practices offers one approach to supporting TEs in connecting research with practice through a focus on TEs researching their own particular contexts, needs and concerns in educating future teachers. Yet engaging in self-study is no easy task. Beginning self-study researchers need to find ways to get and keep time, support and resources for continuing their work.

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Over the past decade, research into self-study communities of inquiry (COI) has been accumulating (see for example, Hoban, 2007, 2012; Vanassche & Kelchtermans 2016; Davey et al, 2011; Geursen et al, 2010; Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011). Broadly speaking, a COI is any group of individuals collaboratively engaged in a process of empirical or conceptual inquiry into problematic situations (Lipman, 2003). In the Netherlands, several iterations of a self-study COI have resulted in a set of seven guidelines for facilitating self-study research with teacher educators (Lunenberg, Korthagen, & Zwart, 2010):

1. Guard the connection between the self-studies and the individual practices and concerns of the teacher educators.
2. Formulate an external goal, and stimulate the researchers to go public (e.g. give a presentation or write a conference paper).
3. Realize the availability of external sources (literature, experts in the field and experienced researchers).
4. Consider the social aspects: create a sense of belonging to a group because of its support function, but also because of the 'voyeurism' aspect.
5. Create a sense of being 'next door'.
6. Take the wrapping up of the self-study studies seriously. Discuss possible follow-ups to prevent the results from fading into oblivion.
7. Support the participants in finding fitting research methods and instruments.

A further, comparative study was conducted with a self-study COI in the USA (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011) that showed remarkable similarities in terms of what was found to support self-study research. An interesting outcome of this comparative study and follow-up studies in the USA was the addition of two further guidelines:

8. *Carry out a self-study on your teaching of self-study research, and explain the underpinnings of the process of doing so to the participants and,*
9. *Invite shared leadership with participants by encouraging them to contribute their expertise and talent.*

In these ways a teacher of self-study research embraces the spirit of self-study through making him or herself vulnerable too, and becomes a model of what it means to study your own practice (Samaras, 2013).

## Aims

This research aims to explore how a new iteration of the Dutch self-study COI (2015-16) interprets and enacts this set of guidelines for facilitating self-study research, and in particular, the newly developed guidelines 8 and 9. In doing so, we asked the following questions:

- How can we, the facilitators, study our own group processes at the same time as guiding others in their self-studies? (guideline 8) and,
- How can we, the facilitators, encourage the other participants to see themselves as valued and valuable partners in our COI? (guideline 9).

While the facilitators have taken the lead in developing this self-study, the other participants were continuously involved during the whole process of conducting this self-study and writing this chapter. In the remainder of the chapter we elaborate the processes and outcomes of our collaborative investigation.

## Approach

### *Participants*

The current Dutch self-study COI comprises 14 members: four are facilitators and 10 are teacher educators who joined the COI with the purpose of researching their own practice within a self-study

community. The facilitators include one of the original facilitators, two participants from the first self-study group, and an experienced self-study colleague who was new to the group. The 10 teacher educators come from 4 different institutions in the Netherlands. One of them had completed a Ph.D, but was new to self-study research. The research experience of the others was limited.

#### *Guiding metaphor*

From the outset of our COI, we chose the metaphor of travelling together on a journey that has become an important thread in connecting and cohering our collaborative learning experiences. Loughran (2014) states that there is no single true or correct path for the professional development of teacher educators, but the path carries signposts. We drew on this idea in our COI in order to help each other to find, recognize and use these signposts. At each meeting we shared and discussed ideas about the progress of our journey through selected images. (See Appendix 1 for some of the images we used).

The COI officially began in May 2015 and consisted of eleven meetings over a period of 14 months. For this chapter we use data collected over the first six meetings.

#### *Data generation and analysis*

Our data is generated in two different ways in order to capture the variety of all participants' perspectives, and includes the following:

- The four facilitators wrote extensive reflections after each meeting of the COI, and shared these via email with each other. Then, each facilitator analysed her/his own reflections on the first six meetings and prepared an individual overview of his/her reflections, including ways in which guideline 8 or guideline 9 was evident. Next, one of facilitators compiled, summarised and compared these overviews.
- During one of the group meetings, the ten teacher educator participants reflected on their experiences of guideline 8 and 9 within the COI. Each participant was provided with a copy of the programme information and powerpoints of the first six meetings and was asked to write down if/when they had experienced the guideline under study. These responses were collected and shared, and then the large group was divided into two subgroups. One subgroup worked on guideline 8, the other subgroup on guideline 9. These subgroups collectively analysed the responses and summarized the outcomes and trends they discovered.

Finally, the outcomes from the facilitators and from the two subgroups were compared by the facilitators. For guideline 8 three, and for guideline 9, two important themes emerged. Then the facilitators wrote a first draft of this chapter, which was sent to all participants for their comments. All comments were taken into account in writing the final article.

Thus, our research approach is driven from a narrative self-study position to “bring into our inquiry issues of context and process” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p.106) and “to capture evidence of the voice of the self [and of] ...the other ... [and of] the practice being explored” (Ibid, p.111). Our approach characterizes the qualities of self-study methodology outlined by LaBoskey (2004) as self-initiated and self-focused (each participant worked from his/her own needs and concerns); improvement aimed (we sought to understand our setting as a COI and how we facilitate learning within it); interactive (checking interpretations of data across multiple perspectives of COI members), using multiple methods (as outlined above) and working towards exemplar-based validation (documenting our processes and learning though the production of this text made available for our COI and broader community scrutiny).

### **Outcomes**

*Guideline 8 Carry out a self-study on your teaching of self-study research, and explain the underpinnings of the process of doing so to the participants.*

Analysis of our collective data shows that all participants (facilitators included) interpreted this guideline more broadly than only focusing on a self-study of our specific COI. In other words, we tended to talk about our experiences of learning about self-study research within the group, and

less about the COI as a site for its own self-study. Analysis of the data revealed three main themes: 1. Using self-studies to provide information, 2. Supporting and underpinning the research process, and 3. Modelling the self-study in progress.

1. Using self-studies to provide information

Within the meetings, the facilitators regularly provided information about conducting self-study research, using examples from their own (and others') experiences. For the other participants, getting information about what is self-study research, as well as learning about the stages of conducting self-study research, methodological issues and structuring a self-study was clearly important. For example, one participant wrote about finding out about the stages of research: '[you] can check the progress of your self-study, which is reassuring'.

And regarding information about self-study methods she remarked: *'there are many possibilities!'*

The usefulness of providing information about self-study as research was also recognized by the facilitators:

*'I think we used all kinds of modelling of our own research thoughts and activities in general. Mandi's tensions, (...) discussing the methodology in my article in the fifth meeting. I saw in my reflections that in my eyes all these activities were successful.'*

2. Supporting and underpinning the research process

*Supporting and underpinning the research process* was also identified as important for all. For example, one participant wrote that it was helpful for her that a facilitator was *'asking why your research theme is important for you'*. Another participant discovered in one of the first meetings that: *'There is more in your practice [to research] than you think!'*

The group members also appreciated that the facilitators were *'demonstrating [research] skills'*.

The journey metaphor was also evident through this theme and proved to be important for all members of the community. In each meeting, the facilitators selected images relating to this metaphor to provoke discussion, and the metaphor is also mentioned frequently by the other participants. One of them wrote next to a powerpoint slide with a sequence of pictures showing someone trying to get too much luggage in a bag: *'I remember this one very well. It represents my feeling'*. And beside a picture with a citation from Hamilton (2005) saying "research is always a fumbling act of discovery" the same participant wrote: *'This shows the uncertainty of the whole process very well'*.

The facilitators also refer to this metaphor:

*'I think the metaphor of a journey proved a very useful one. Becoming a teacher educator is a journey (...), this metaphor will not only help us design a programme, but will also help us consider the roles of the participants more easily. We cannot do the travelling for them, can we?'*

Another of the facilitators expressed her initial hesitation about the use of the journey metaphor but then recognized its usefulness as she saw how it helped to make concrete the experiences of working together on a self-study:

*'To begin with I was a bit hesitant about the journey metaphor...[but] [e]ach week as we shared our images and metaphors ... I could see that people enjoyed engaging with the images and that it helped us make our progress (and struggles) shared and more concrete. It was something we could refer back to regularly as a kind of group language for talking about how we were doing and feeling.'*

All participants referred to the importance of reflecting about engaging in research and their feelings as researchers. Two examples illustrate this point:

*'The reflection (about getting into a research mode, putting on your research hat, managing our struggles, growing into a research culture, and balancing between safety and challenge) was very nice. (Participant)*

*'The halfway reflection felt good (...). I was happy that there was also attention for becoming part of a research culture. (Facilitator)*

### 3. Modelling self-study in progress

As mentioned above, all participants, including the facilitators, agreed that the facilitators modelled self-study processes through sharing information and offering experiences from their own self-studies and by demonstrating research behavior and skills.

However the data also revealed that what proved to be more complicated is modelling and sharing *this study of the COI itself as a self-study in progress*. The facilitators' struggles are illustrated through their reflections about the way they involved the other members of the community:

*'I think we modeled self-study in several ways: by looking at Paul's [facilitator] article, discussing how we get into research mode, by sharing our questions, by writing proposals together, but we do not share this research with them [the other participants] very openly.'*

*'Looking at my reflections I had the impression that the interest and commitment of our participants had to grow, but was really there in 6<sup>th</sup> meeting. A thing that perhaps could be better was/is the openness about our way of data sampling [for this study] and the data itself.'*

*'The positive side of working together in this study is that the participants experience the process of conducting research and going public, but rereading [my notes] a more problematic side might be that they did not feel enough ownership.'*

*'I think it was really difficult to both help new people learn about self-study and conduct a self-study at the same time... I know that is what is expected in practitioner research – that we engage in it to learn about it together, but at times I feel that it was hard for participants to pay attention to the dual agenda. They wanted to learn about self-study and we were asking to go one layer above that and ask them about what it was like to work in a group in which we study our own learning processes as a form of self-study.'*

The data show that there is a 'cleft stick' here. On the one hand, the group members would like to learn more about the processes of a group self-study, but on the other hand their reflections sometimes indicate that the facilitators mainly owned this study:

*'Sometimes I become irritated because the facilitators' study interferes while I am in a flow with my own study.'*

However, there is some evidence that this feeling was changing after the first draft of the Castle paper was shared. For example, one participant remarked: *'your draft works for me as a form of modeling self study. Maybe the most important contribution until now. (I speak for myself of course).'*

To summarise: While overall the facilitators seem to be modelling the process of self-study within the COI and this modelling is appreciated by the other participants, all community members identified initial problems with regard to the concurrent use of this self-study in progress as an example. This seems to be an aspect that needs continuous monitoring in a self-study COI.

*Guideline 9. Invite shared leadership with participants by encouraging them to contribute their expertise and talents.*

Analysis of data collected about this guideline indicates that both facilitators and other group members distinguished between the nature of the contribution from the facilitators and from the other participants of the COI. Thus, we have organized the results accordingly: 1. Contributions of the (other) participants; 2. Contribution of the facilitators.

#### 1. Contribution of the participants

The various contributions of the participants to the leadership of the group was identified as, for example, giving presentations, giving feedback on each other's research questions, preparing together for conferences.

Moreover, participants emphasized that an important starting point for working and learning together in this community is *'what we share: we are all teacher educators'*. They also referred to the journey metaphor, emphasizing that this is not a pre-tailored course: *'There are no prefab answers, you need each other'* and: *'Others' questions/problems often also help your own research'*. And they concluded: *'We are becoming a community'*.

More than the other participants, the facilitators seem to problematize how they could invite

leadership of all group members in a productive way:

*'I have the impression that our participants have a lot of expertise, but it is difficult to think of how to make use of it.'*

*'I hint at the fact that it may be impossible to have shared leadership from the start, and that it is also a matter of building trust and group feeling...and that once you recognize each other's strengths, it is easier to appeal to them.'*

They also consciously noticed successful contributions of the other participants:

*The intervision went well: I liked the open and personal discussion in my subgroup, and I think the intervision approach really helped the participants to further clarify what they want to study.'*

*'A great example of this for me was when I had not prepared very much about how we should work as a small group (me and some participants) on analyzing the data and getting the next version of the paper ready for the castle review. I handed out the reviewer comments... and Desiree read aloud each comment. Everyone made suggestions about how we could understand and address it. It was really fantastic to be a part of this. Participants had terrific ideas and we were all excited by doing this together. In the end this was what I had wanted [to achieve] but I didn't know how to do it. Simply handing it over at this stage and within a small group was a really great approach. But I just couldn't have predicted that in advance.'*

## 2. Contribution of facilitators

The (other) participants also mentioned the contribution of the facilitators to the leadership of the community. According to them, the facilitators offered space for growth and supported involvement because they maintained a guard on the process (guideline 1). Other contributions mentioned included that they *'create safety by keeping research small'* and *'stimulate cohesion and coziness'* [by taking care of coffee and snacks].

The facilitators identified the challenges of keeping discussions focused on research and ensuring that useful feedback is given on presentations. Two reflections from the facilitators illustrate this point:

*'For me, another point of attention is how to help the participants to focus on their research when they work in subgroups.'*

*'I feel we should play a very clear role in the debriefing (after presentations). I felt that (...) could have learnt more from our discussion and I also feel that the group could have learnt more if we had also talked about what constitutes useful feedback to a question like (...).'*

The facilitators also reflected about their responsibility for the progress of the other participants: about helping and/or pushing them to get and stay on track, and supporting them to stay motivated. For example, one of the facilitators wrote:

*'I am worried that if there will not be enough progress in the individual studies the motivation will drop.'*

And:

*'My feeling is that on the one hand we have to be clear about the stage everyone's self-study is supposed to be at (some pushing is healthy, I think), but on the other hand we have to be realistic and admit that not everyone is on the same track.'*

In sum: it is clear that with regard to guideline 9 the facilitators experienced some tensions in managing their own roles as leaders and encouraging the other participants to recognize and contribute their own expertise to the COI:

*'I notice that we have different things to contribute. What becomes apparent is that I feel we are the ones who can and should structure the [session]debrief and make sure participants give useful feedback [to each other]. Quite confronting to read this, but I know this is how I felt.'*

At the same time, the data suggests that the other participants do not experience these tensions in the same way as the facilitators.

One of them remarked: *'Elise and I found each other as critical friends. The theme that connects us is the question of how to write an [educational] auto-biography (...) We exchanged to sort out how we could help each other.'*

## Discussion and conclusion

Gathering and analyzing our data has been an important process and yielded useful insights that can inform learning not only within our own COI, but also other groups of teacher educators learning to do self-study together. For both guidelines 8 and 9 we recognize particular tensions (Berry, 2007) at play that need to be apprehended and managed for a productive learning process. The tensions are characterized by issues of *telling and growth, acknowledging and building on experience, and planning and being responsive*.

In terms of guideline 8 (modeling), we recognize that it is challenging to self-study our process while engaged in it. This is particularly so in the beginning stages of the COI. At the same time, we see that we are making progress and should persist.

In terms of guideline 9 (participation), we recognize differences between the perceptions of facilitators about what it means to invite and share leadership, and what it means for the other participants. For facilitators, we are reminded that shared leadership does not mean we cannot act as leaders ourselves. We sought to position all participants as knowers but we felt unsure about how to do this. Through creating conditions that invited all participants to work together in an open way, opportunities for contributing expertise and talents emerged, often in unanticipated ways. An important point from this is the need to be sensitive to opportunities for participation, rather than prescribing them in advance.

Finally, important to our project is the way in which we create safe spaces so that everyone can effectively contribute to, and learn from, the COI experience. We have noticed that the types of contexts in which participants work (e.g., university or institutes of education) and the different experiences they bring (previous research experience or not) have an impact on how comfortable or challenging it is to feel part of the COI. This is an aspect of our study that we are continuing to investigate.

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**Appendix 1. The progress of our journey through selected images**

