

## Presenter and audience: The two selves who go public in self-study research

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*Self-study is about learning from experience that is embedded within teachers creating new experiences for themselves and those whom they teach. Like new teachers, teacher educators must learn to learn from experiences and self-study is a way for teacher educators to do that. (Russell, 1998, p. 6)*

In their historical overview of the development of the self-study school, Samaras & Freese (2009) described the significant role of the Castle Conference “as a valuable forum for bringing researchers together to dialogue, to ask probing questions, to make their knowledge public and open for critique, and to contribute to the evolving nature of the field” (p. 6). In essence, Samaras & Freese are drawing attention to the importance of moving beyond the ‘self’ in order to make the knowledge from self-study public, useable and applicable in the work of others.

If self-study is to be meaningful in the development of the pedagogical practice of, in particular, teacher educators then the nature of the dissemination of our self-study research and the ways in which we interact, build upon and interpret the knowledge derived of that research matters. But how does that play out in reality? What is it that we do as a community that fosters the public critique of our work in ways that encourage others to engage with, and build upon, our findings? These are questions which have been at the heart of self-study since its inception (see for example, Hamilton et al., 1998), and, it could well be argued, are questions that we continually need to address in order to ensure that we practice what we preach – a tenet of self-study.

Whitehead (1989) famously invited the S-STEP community to confront the disparities in what we say, what we believe, and what we actually do in our *teaching* work, and to acknowledge the possibility of being a ‘living contradiction’. In this paper, we attempt to take up Whitehead’s challenge through a consideration of how and why we engage in ‘going public’ which, as Shulman (1999) noted, is a key aspect of scholarship that should be neither overlooked nor taken for granted.

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As teacher educators working together in the same institution, our collaboration consistently reminds us that we view much of our work through a pedagogical lens. Not surprisingly, we consider the Castle conference as an invitation to do more than simply present a self-study paper; we aim to create a pedagogic experience that will engage participants in the study, both cognitively and emotionally. Doing so in writing – the forerunner to a session at the Castle – is challenging. In this paper, we attempt to place the reader in context through what we describe as a trigger, or the ‘way in’ to the situation. The trigger is drawn from a critical incident (Tripp, 1993) derived of the pedagogic experience we attempted to create at the last castle conference (Forgasz & Loughran, 2016). In it, we draw attention to how pedagogic intent, practice and interpretation interact to create outcomes not always envisaged.

Our collaborations have led us more and more to examine what we do publicly when engaging in learning from self-study research (our own and that of others). Our purpose in this paper is not to rationalise our behaviour or to justify our approach (Loughran, 2002); rather, to open up the situation to scrutiny in an attempt to advance our practice as a community more generally. In so doing, we aim to foster a legitimate invitation to the self-study community to purposefully seek to ‘practice what we preach’.

## Trigger

*At Castle 2016, we reported on a study of a teacher education practice developed by Rachel, working with John as a critical friend. When planning the nature of our Castle presentation of that study, we agreed that our main aim was to invite the audience to consider their own practices in relation to both the self-study approach we had adopted and the key findings of Rachel’s study. To achieve our aim, we decided on an interview approach whereby John, the critical friend, would be the host and ask Rachel key questions about the aims, methodology, and key findings of her study. Following some ‘context setting’ and familiarisation with our approach to working together, John would then pose a question about Rachel’s responses for the audience to discuss amongst themselves, first in small breakout groups and then as a whole. Then we would move to a Q&A on the next aspect of the findings.*

*Because we wanted the questions to enable exploration of the complexities of practice in sophisticated ways, we pre-planned some broad topics and questions. However, our planning was intended only as an advance organiser of themes, not as a script. We wanted to remain present and responsive from moment to moment. Therefore, rather than presenting a well-rehearsed routine, we chose to largely improvise what was, in the end, a public performance of our selves and of our relationship. In true improvisational fashion, we ended up pursuing some topics that were unplanned and allowed discussion of others to go in unexpected directions.*

*Our pedagogic intent was to engage the audience in the study. Because of the roles we had assigned ourselves, the course of the conversation was, in many ways, determined by John’s often rigorous and robust questioning in his role as the critical friend (as agreed in advance of the session), designed to keep us sensitive to the issues and draw out genuine views and ideas rather than pre-planned ripostes. Rachel responded with various degrees of enthusiasm, confidence, vulnerability, and even surprise when faced with unexpected (and unrehearsed) lines of inquiry.*

*Feedback we received after the session was polarised. For example, some found the session to be helpfully educative while others were deeply troubled. Interestingly, a sticking point that arose appeared to be based on the structural dynamic of the session itself: Rachel’s teaching and research practices were laid bare for microscopic interrogation, first by a critical friend and then by the audience.*

*Questions arose in the form of contradictions and tensions as illustrated by the following juxtapositions: “Was this the performance of how a rigorous research process is buoyed by unflinching critical friendship? or, was it merely evidence of a disturbing power dynamic at play?” and, “Was Rachel’s vulnerable sharing a courageous and agentic act? or, was she being held up to uncomfortable public scrutiny?” Further to these, “Were the audience being invited to explore the nuances of their teaching and research practices? or, were they being told what to do and how to do it?”*

## Response

Initially we were surprised and somewhat taken-aback by some of the responses. As evident in some perspectives offered on the experience, our pedagogic intent was not realised in the ways we had anticipated and aspects of our practice were interpreted in ways that were initially confusing and confronting. Upon reflection, we came to appreciate how these divergent readings of our relational dynamic and our intentions could be possible. The experience raised for us questions about the gap between intention and reception in the public presentation of research in the context of a conference (Castle in particular).

Some months later we discussed the possibilities for a new self-study collaboration catalysed by our Castle (2016) experience. We speculated about some of the factors that we thought might have contributed to the differing interpretations – and the disparity between those received by each of us separately. As a consequence, our conversation turned more broadly to the ‘purpose’ in going public with self-study research; in respect of both presenters and audiences.

Through our discussion we began to tease out some of our underlying assumptions and intentions in relation to what we aimed to achieve, offer, and gain by going public with our own work, as well as when we engage with the research presented by others (i.e., exploring both our presenter and our audience experiences and perspectives). We also speculated as to the enablers and obstacles for achieving those aims. Our initial assumption hunting (Brookfield, 1995) led us to pose a number of questions derived of our experience that go to the issue of purpose in ‘reporting and reception’ of self-study research.

## Questions

This is a conceptual study designed to consider both presenter and audience roles in the act of ‘going public’ with self-study research in conference settings – the Castle in particular. Specifically, we draw on both existing literatures and our personal experiential understandings in order to interrogate the questions about the public sharing of self-study research that were catalysed as a consequence of the situation described in the trigger (above). As such, the paper is intended to confront some of our underlying taken-for-granted assumptions about reporting self-study research, reconsidering them by reframing the conference presentation as a pedagogical encounter. As a consequence, the questions that emerge go to the very nature of:

- Presenting self-study research findings - is there a pedagogic intent/what is the purpose in going public?
- Testing for resonance – (how) do others identify with the situation?
- Audience learning - what might others learn or consider in relation to their own teacher education practice and/or their own self-study research?
- Presenter learning – (how) is audience feedback given/received?
- Engagement – as a community what is involved in meaningfully engaging with research outcomes?

Due to word limits for the paper we are not able to explicitly respond to each question, but in terms of a big picture viewpoint, we argue that these questions shed light on two (perhaps tacit) foundations of the Castle conference, the nature of: a ‘safe space’ in which to share self-study research; and, intentions and actions (from a presenter and audience perspective) when engaging with self-study research. We focus attention on each of these in turn below.

## Safe spaces: Safety 'from' and safety 'to'

[The Castle Conference is] a safe space for creating a learning community of self-study researchers who are willing to ask questions, clarify terms, take risks experimenting with innovative approaches, and examine and reframe their views about teaching and teacher education practices. (Samaras & Freese, 2009, pp. 6 – 7).

The self-study literature has numerous references to risk-taking, displaying vulnerability and seeking honest feedback and professional critique through research and practice (see for example, Brandenburg, 2008; Clarke & Erickson, 2004; Kosnick, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2006; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). However, when it comes to sharing self-study beyond the written word alone, such actions require a genuine sense of trust and safety in order to both encourage and support what it might mean to 'go public'. These qualities (asking questions, taking risks, and examining and reframing one's views) describe not just a hope in undertaking self-study research but more so, an expectation of how to engage with others in the dissemination of research (particularly at the Castle Conference).

The notion of 'safe spaces,' then, assumes great importance in the self-study community as it implies the active development of an environment (or perhaps even a culture), in which portraying the reality of one's own practice is essential to meaningful engagement with the situation under scrutiny. As accounts from the field suggest (Berry, 2007; Bullock, 2011; Clift, 2004), the historical claim that self-study seeks to build a sense of community to provide a safe haven for teacher educators to examine their practice (LaBoskey, 2006; Schuck & Russell, 2005) is fundamental. That is especially so when considering those teacher educators who perceive their teaching work to be undervalued and whose research into their own practice may be dismissed as lacking rigour (within and/or outside of their home institutions). Sadly, such situations persist despite the field being formally recognized for over a quarter of a century, and may be all the more confronting for those in research intensive institutions where teaching can at times be characterised as lesser work – especially when under constant pressure to produce quality research.

In one sense, the Castle Conference creates opportunities for self-study researchers to be safe *from*: personal criticism; marginalisation; rigid pre-ordained structures; and, the pressure of conformity. Perhaps more significantly, an environment that offers safety *from* all of these oppressions then simultaneously creates possibilities in terms of safety *to*: take risks; innovate; be vulnerable; and experience learning through uncertainty. These kinds of outcomes (to which Samaras and Freese (2009) and others refer) can be experienced as *freedoms*, for example, the way the Castle Conference invites a diversity of approaches to research presentation and participation. However, the power of invitation may only be realised through the attitude of whole-heartedness (Dewey, 1933); alternatively, an invitation may be interpreted as some form of mandate or expectation, neither of which encourage the whole-heartedness to prevail.

For us, the sense of *safety* to also crucially extends to how we engage with, and respond to, each other's research: safety to critique; safety to challenge; safety to push each other's thinking; and, to be pushed and challenged ourselves. Our willingness to offer and receive robust and frank critique in the course of conference dissemination is, arguably, a very powerful indicator of just how safe a space really is and brings into sharp focus the proposition that a 'good learning experience can be uncomfortable' (Berry & Loughran, 2002). In self-study there is often "considerable tension between a commitment to collaboration, on the one hand, and genuine critique of others' ideas and positions, on the other, [it] is a tension that is always operating" (Cochran-Smith et al., 1999, p. 243). If, as audiences to one another's research, we shy away from the tension of creating uncomfortable experiences, we may well be squandering the potential opened up by having created a 'safe space' in the first place. Capitulating to polite ineffectuality diminishes the scholarly and pedagogical promise of 'going public' and raises questions that go to the core purpose of sharing the findings of our research through conference dissemination in the first place.

This is not to suggest that genuine critique of others' ideas and positions is a simple or straightforward act; and it should not be blithely interpreted as such. Rather, we are acknowledging that it can be incredibly difficult to *offer* robust public critique and just as difficult to be *genuinely*

responsive to even the most legitimately constructive critique. There are abiding dilemmas to be managed in the search for pedagogic equilibrium (Mansfield, 2016) in the act of going public with self-study research. For those offering critique, an appropriate balance must be sought between superficial encouragement (sometimes expressed as uncritical affirmation) and robust pursuit of ideas (sometimes experienced as an undermining attack). For those responding, being 'at ease' in the face of uncomfortable pedagogic experiences demands humility of an order that is perhaps only possible when there is an explicit sense of *safety* in the situation and in one's own sense of professional worth. Nurturing these capacities for critical exchange in one another is essential to the creation of a research community that offers its members a safe space in which to evolve and thrive.

## Performing ourselves: Intention and reception

If the opportunity to approach Castle Conference presentations is largely viewed as a pedagogical encounter, then a focus must inevitably sharpen around the pedagogic aspects of our 'performance of self' as teacher-learners (Smith, 2017) rather than presenters and audiences. It seems reasonable to suggest that the relational and interactive nature of Castle Conference presentations (the pursuit of the 'safe space'), not only encourages, but should also enhance the possibility of being both teachers and learners by embracing both the roles of presenter and audience.

Kelchtermans' (2009) notion of the teacher's professional self-understanding offers a helpful analytical framework for thinking about how we perform ourselves – and how that might be received at the Castle Conference. At the centre of Kelchtermans' proposition is the acknowledgement that because "teaching is done by somebody ... [i]t matters who the teacher is" (p. 258). That proposition resonates well with the intent of self-study as the experience of the person matters, and thoughtful examination of experience helps to build community.

To reframe Kelchtermans' central proposition in relation to performances of self at the Castle Conference, it could be stated that: we are received by others in a particular way as a consequence of others' perceptions of who we are as teacher educators and as self-study scholars. Therefore, the way we understand ourselves as members of the self-study community matters, yet to a large extent that understanding is influenced by how others see us perhaps more than how we see ourselves.

Kelchtermans emphasised the view that all pedagogical encounters are "importantly characterised by passivity, by being exposed to others and thus being vulnerable" (p. 265). How we are *perceived* by others most certainly influences how we are *received*. The better we understand those perceptions/interpretations, the more agency we have to take pedagogical 'risks' in attempting to create meaningful learning experiences through 'reception'. Kelchtermans' five dimensions of professional self-understanding illustrate how, in pushing the bounds of this form of risk, the self is challenged personally and pedagogically. His dimensions are: self-image; self-esteem; job motivation; task perception; and, future perspective (see pp. 261 – 263), and they certainly prompt serious reflection on the extent to which one is prepared to take a risk and the consequences embedded in so doing.

Consider for example, questions we might ask ourselves when contemplating our engagement in pedagogic experiences at the Castle: how do I see myself within the self-study community and how am I positioned/perceived by others (self image)?; how competent and confident do I feel as a teacher educator and as a self-study scholar (self esteem)?; what do I hope to get out of attending self-study conferences (job motivation)?; how do I understand my role and responsibilities as both presenter and audience of self-study research (task perception)?; and, how does all of that fit within my broader career intentions (future perspective)?

With heightened self-understanding of ourselves and our practice as both presenters and audiences, perhaps alternative possibilities will open up for future (inter)actions that defy the default behaviours of defensive justification or passive agreement. In his self-study of how his students interpreted his practice, Russell (1997) boldly stated *How I teach is the message*. Kelchtermans (2009) built on Russell's premise, proposing that *Who I am in how I teach is the*

message. In light of all of the above, we might suggest similarly, that in conference settings, *Who I am shapes the message*. From that perspective, participation in self-study sessions at the Castle may well engender new meaning.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we reconsider some of our own questions about what happens when the conference presentation is conceptualised as a pedagogic encounter. The matter of whether there is pedagogic intent in presenting self-study research becomes entirely self-evident since a pedagogic encounter is, necessarily, driven by pedagogic intent – assuming an understanding that “telling is not teaching” and “listening is not learning”. The more important question, then, is about the nature of that pedagogic intent, part of which goes to the matter of resonance. Discerning whether and how our research questions and/or outcomes resonate with others is a dimension of trustworthiness in self-study that is crucial to engaging others in the research. In the pedagogic encounter of the conference presentation, presenters and audiences alike are thus positioned as teacher-learners who potentially both learn from, and teach one another something about the question(s) under investigation – i.e., moving beyond story (Berry & Kosnik, 2010).

As presenters, this means conducting and presenting research that will make a valuable contribution to knowledge development and thus help to advance the field of teaching and learning about teaching. It also means being capable of ‘letting go’ and taking on new ideas and new learning (genuinely reframing and learning to abstract from that experience to others).

As audiences, being teacher-learners means participating in such a way that we learn something about our own teacher education practices and/or our self-study research. Sometimes that might also mean questioning and countering the ideas being presented in an effort to facilitate the learning of self and others at the same time.

Whether in our roles as presenter or audience, approaching research dissemination as a pedagogical opportunity derived of critical exchange goes to the very heart of reflective practice and the importance of the pedagogic approach to withholding judgment built around Schon’s (1983) notion of framing and reframing. That, surely, is an important way of seeking to practice what we preach and address instances of being a living contradiction – the heart and soul of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices.

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