

# Signposts, Profits, and Pitfalls in Teaching and Learning Self-Study Research: A Conversation



Mieke Lunenberg, Amanda Berry, Paul van den Bos, Janneke Geursen, Els Hagebeuk, Ari de Heer, Jorien Radstake, Martine van Rijswijk, and Hanneke Tuithof

## Introduction

In this final chapter we, the authors of the Dutch part of this book, share our conversation about what we have discovered about teaching, learning, and enacting self-study methodology. In this way, we hope to offer readers inspiration and suggestions for starting their own self-study communities and trajectories.<sup>1</sup> Loughran's (2014) article, "Professional developing as a teacher educator" helped us to frame this chapter. In particular, Loughran's article helped us to understand how

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<sup>1</sup>"Trajectory" refers to one year during self-study groups of teacher educators which are facilitated by experienced self-study researchers.

M. Lunenberg (✉) · P. van den Bos  
VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [mieke@lunenberg.info](mailto:mieke@lunenberg.info); [p.j.p.vanden.bos@vu.nl](mailto:p.j.p.vanden.bos@vu.nl)

A. Berry  
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia  
e-mail: [amanda.berry@monash.edu](mailto:amanda.berry@monash.edu)

J. Geursen  
Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [j.w.geursen@iclon.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:j.w.geursen@iclon.leidenuniv.nl)

E. Hagebeuk  
SKO West-Friesland, Wognum, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [Els.Hagebeuk@skowestfriesland.nl](mailto:Els.Hagebeuk@skowestfriesland.nl)

A. de Heer · M. van Rijswijk · H. Tuithof  
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [M.M.vanRijswijk@uu.nl](mailto:M.M.vanRijswijk@uu.nl); [H.Tuithof@uu.nl](mailto:H.Tuithof@uu.nl)

J. Radstake  
Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Zwolle, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [jc.radstake@windesheim.nl](mailto:jc.radstake@windesheim.nl)

the development of teacher educators' knowledge and practice of teaching and learning about teaching is intimately tied to: understanding of identity; the challenges and expectations of the teacher education enterprise; and, the place of scholarship as an important marker of knowledge, skill, and ability in the academy (p.2).

Loughran explains how these various aspects of teacher educators' work, learning, and research are related to each other and emphasizes that while teacher educators need to find their own professional development pathways, there are signposts to look out for that can be helpful in supporting their efforts.

We began work on this final chapter when the first drafts of the other chapters were under review or in revision; hence we were familiar with what was included in the other chapters of this section of the book. The first chapter of this section, by Mieke Lunenberg, summarizes the history of teaching, learning, and enacting self-study research in the Netherlands. The second chapter focuses on teaching a self-study trajectory and is written by Amanda Berry, Paul van den Bos, Janneke Geursen, and Mieke Lunenberg. The third and fourth chapters of this section are from Jorien Radstake and Els Hagebeuk, both participants in a Dutch self-study trajectory. Jorien's self-study focuses on improving her feedback on her students' research projects, while at the same time she herself carried out a study and got feedback. Els's contribution is a reflection on the insights she gathered through her self-study about her work as school-based teacher educator and what it meant for her to present the results of her self-study in national and international public fora. Ari de Heer also participated in a Dutch self-study trajectory. Together with his colleagues Martine van Rijswijk and Hanneke Tuithof, he wrote the fifth chapter of this section: an ongoing self-study on their development as researchers in a shifting professional landscape and on the consequences of these shifts for themselves and their collegial collaboration.

To start our conversation about this final chapter, we all sent each other a "postcard" with a picture that we associated with teaching, learning, and/or enacting self-study research. On our postcard, each of us wrote an idea or suggestion that could help someone who wanted to start a self-study group. Next, we organized a meeting and used these postcards as a starting point for our brainstorm about this chapter. We explained to each other why we had chosen a specific picture and discussed the ideas and suggestions each of us had written on his or her postcard (Photo 1).

Four main issues arose from our brainstorm, which we then elaborated on by continuing our conversation by email and by including studies on previous Dutch self-study experiences and other literature. (For the underpinning framework informing this approach, see Loughran and Northfield 1998; Guilfoyle et al. 2004; Berry and Crowe 2009; Berry et al. 2015).

Interestingly, all four issues emerging from our brainstorm connect with elements in Loughran's above quote about teacher educators' professional development. The first issue is the way that the context in which a self-study is carried out influences the further development of a teacher educator identity. The second issue focuses on the relationship between the sometimes confusing and lonely self-study journey and the importance of travelling that journey together with colleagues in a motivating and safe environment. The third issue explores the multilevel learning opportunities self-study research offers. The fourth issue focuses on the teaching of



**Photo 1** Brainstorm meeting about this chapter

In the photo, from left: Paul van den Bos, Els Hagebeuk, Jorien Radstake, Mieke Lunenberg, Ari de Heer, and Hanneke Tuithof

self-study research and more specifically on the pedagogical approaches that teachers of self-study research use to offer signposts to others. After discussing each of these issues and providing suggestions and ideas for others interested in self-study groups, we conclude this chapter with some final remarks.

## Self-Study Research and Teacher Educator Identity

In self-study literature, it is often emphasized that self-study research is a productive way to combine teacher educators' dual roles of *teacher of teachers* and *researcher*, because self-study research starts with a challenge or problem related to being a teacher of teachers (Loughran 2014). In the Netherlands, however, most teacher educators only have a role as a teacher of teachers. Hence, for Dutch teacher educators, self-study research is not a way *to combine* the roles of teacher of teacher and researcher but a way *to extend* their teacher educator role as a teacher of teachers and to explore the role of researcher.

In our conversation about this issue, we discovered that for us, because of this (Dutch) situation, being a teacher of teachers has a deeper meaning than only being a source of our research questions. It defines our identity as teacher educator. Self-study research is seen as a bridge being built – but not yet finished – between



**Photo 2** Postcards we sent each other to start our conversation about this chapter

our primary identity as teacher of teachers and our emerging identity as researcher. In our meeting, Ari stated it this way:

Self-study research helps to ground me and to give me wings. It has brought research within my reach and made it possible for me to share my inspiration with others. It is neither a trick nor a specific method. It is about basic things between people. It is deeply grounded. (See also his postcard: Photo 2, top, right side)

A study following up on the participants in previous Dutch self-study trajectories in 2007 and 2008 (Lunenberg et al. 2011) showed that this exploration into the research role led to teacher educators' theoretical growth, greater awareness of their ongoing development, a shift toward being knowledge producers compared with being

“only” knowledge users, and growth in self-confidence. In different ways, carrying out a self-study and participating in a self-study trajectory influenced these teacher educators’ identities and researcherly dispositions (Lunenberg et al. 2012; Tack and Van der Linde 2014). Some of the teacher educators from the 2007 and 2008 cohorts continued to conduct self-studies and even included colleagues in their quest (Ari), while others extended their self-study activities by becoming facilitators for a subsequent trajectory (Janneke, Paul). Some used their self-study experiences primarily to better underpin their teaching and to better support their students’ research projects while others started a Ph.D. trajectory (Hanneke, Martine). Hence, for some, the roles of teacher educator and researcher became more integrated, while for others doing research became part of their professional identity as a teacher of teachers (Lunenberg et al. 2012).

*Suggestion 1: Be conscious of the roles that teacher educators have at the start of a self-study. These roles may influence the meaning that self-study research will have for individual participants and their identity development.*

## A Personal Struggle and a Supportive Safe Group

Another important issue in our conversation was the reciprocal relationship between, on the one hand, self-study research as a lonely sometimes complicated journey and, on the other hand, the importance of the support and safety that a group offered. Both Mandi and Paul emphasized that self-study research, especially at the start, can sometimes feel confusing. Paul wrote on his postcard (Photo 2, middle, right side): “Sometimes it feels like a chaos and at the start you have to accept that chaos. It can lead to surprising and beautiful outcomes.” Mandi’s postcard<sup>2</sup> shows a person walking through an open field, creating a pathway as she walks. Mandi wrote on her postcard: “Stay focused and persist. Sometimes you can only see the path you’ve travelled after you created it.” Els’s postcard also illustrates that at the beginning of the journey, the destination can be hard to see. The path on her postcard ends in the clouds. The journey metaphor is also represented by the postcards Jorien and Mieke sent (top, left side, and middle, left side).

Martine confirmed that self-study research requires persistence and staying focused and added that it is important to also work in a disciplined and systematic way. She emphasized the importance of involving others in your explorations. Martine’s postcard shows six ants, balancing a branch. Working diligently, together they try to bridge a gap in their path by using the branch.

In our conversation, it became clear that working together helped teacher educators to stay on track, even when the path was unclear or the destination uncertain. Ari emphasized that the safety of the group helps to move through chaos and to find your path.

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<sup>2</sup>For copyright reasons, not all pictures can be shown.

Giving and receiving feedback, reporting on progress, and working toward a shared deadline create focus. During our postcard sharing meeting, Paul said: “It keeps your mind on the job, also because you feel obliged to each other.”

As authors, each of us has experience with collaborative self-studies as well as participating in and facilitating self-study trajectories. In these setups, besides the abovementioned practical aspects and the – in self-study research essential – need for critical friends, the emotional support of working together proved also important. Hanneke emphasized that working on a collaborative self-study research project with Martine and Ari (see previous chapter) kept her also motivated for continuing her Ph.D. study. Hanneke’s postcard (bottom, left side) illustrates the importance of being part of a group.

In 2012, Ari, Janneke, Mieke, Paul, and other colleagues described the feelings of safety that their collaborative self-study research group brought them:

Our community proved to be a safe meeting place, a place where we could inform each other about the discoveries we had made when studying our practices, discussing not only the how, but also the why of our findings and thus contributing to improving not only our personal practices, but also each other’s. By analyzing deeper meanings underlying the outcomes, we have “moved beyond the story” (Lunenberg et al. 2012, p. 189).

From the outset, organizing and working together in a community has been a point of attention in teaching self-study research. In 2007, Hoban already pointed to the importance of social aspects in teaching self-study research, such as organizing face-to-face meetings, because of their support function. The studies on Dutch self-study trajectories confirm this importance. Meetings offer the unique opportunity to gather and work together, also because busy schedules make it hard to support each other outside of the meetings (Lunenberg et al. 2010).

In our conversation, both Jorien and Els stated that the face-to-face meetings had helped them to overcome the vague beginnings of their self-study research and their struggling:

The meetings are motivating, after the meeting it is sometimes a struggle. But after that you are content that you did it, proud (Jorien).

Self-study research has offered me surprising insights. It is a journey, a learning process. Initially, the final destination was vague. Travelling together is important and motivating, it keeps you moving (Els).

In line with these quotes from Jorien and Els, the Dutch studies on teaching self-study research also emphasize the emotional support that meetings offer to participants in a self-study trajectory. Participants found the meetings important because of the openness, the struggling together, and the fact that everyone’s experiences are comparable (Lunenberg et al. 2010, p. 1285). As also reported in the second chapter of this section of the book, the meetings felt safe, helped participants to stay connected, and motivated them, which was important for making progress with their individual self-studies. As one of the participants wrote, “[the meetings] worked as some sort of lifeline to the self-study.”

*Suggestion 2: Foster the relationship between, on the one hand, working on individual studies and, on the other hand, organizing meetings that offer conceptual, methodological, practical, and emotional support.*

## Multilevel Learning

A third theme that came up in our conversation is multilevel learning. Paul commented that “Self-study research forces us to look into our own learning about teaching, something we also ask our students to do.” Teacher educators often struggle with connecting their roles of teacher of teachers and researcher. Bronkhorst (2013) states that when teacher educators recognize and accept that there can be an “in-between position,” self-study can be a powerful tool for teacher educators to combine both research and teaching. Self-study connects teaching and research in a natural way.

In a self-study trajectory, participants sometimes also experienced the effects of pedagogical approaches they themselves use with their students. For example, in her contribution to this book, Els writes:

I noticed, that during the year I studied my own practice, my perspective on my practice changed. I became conscious of things I had taken for granted until then. I discovered, for example, how confronting analyzing your own video can be. Up till then I had filmed my own students and discussed the tape with them without being fully aware of the emotional impact such an activity can have. Showing my video in a meeting of our community made me feel both excited and vulnerable.

By studying their own practice, teacher educators act as a role model for their students. Teacher educators become more aware of the pitfalls faced by their students when carrying out research and the support they may need. Especially in the Dutch context, whereby most teacher educators do not have research tasks as part of their job, awareness of such issues is of great value to teacher education practices (Geursen et al. 2010). Jorien’s self-study (see also her chapter) offers a beautiful example:

Furthermore, I received feedback on my study of ‘feedback’! I felt how important feedback is, how important it is that you receive feedback in a timely way, and how encouraged you are when the feedback is critical but positive. The feedback made me want to continue my study immediately and helped me to think more deeply about my study and to grow in my study. These experiences also helped me to understand the feelings of the students that I coach while they do their research.

Interestingly, experiencing the effects of feedback was felt not only by Jorien but also Mieke, Jorien’s facilitator, and the reviewers of her chapter for this book, mentioned that reading Jorien’s draft made them more conscious about the way they formulated their feedback on her chapter.

*Suggestion 3: Be aware of the opportunities self-study research offers for multilevel learning. New learning by teacher educators through self-study can shed new light on the learning of their students.*

## Facilitating a Self-Study Group

In the last decade, several studies about teaching self-study research have been published, and knowledge of teaching self-study research is accumulating (see also the first and second chapters of this section of the book). Guidelines for supporting self-study research have been developed, studied, and reformulated in a range of international contexts (Hoban 2007; Lunenberg and Samaras 2011; Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2015). In our conversation, we focused on a specific aspect of teaching self-study research that until now did not get much attention: the pedagogical approaches of the facilitators.

In the Dutch self-study trajectories, both facilitators and participants were teacher educators. Also because of the Dutch emphasis on the *teacher of teachers*' role, the facilitators were conscious of the fact that they would be seen as models for teaching self-study research and that the participants were also conscious and curious about this. Els, for example, emphasized in our conversation that the facilitators' choices for pedagogical approaches were important to her: "... because they are teacher educators too." In the second chapter of this section, "Saying yes to the adventure," the way the participants evaluated and valued these approaches was highlighted. For example: "I remember an exercise with putting post-its on problem statements from peers and passing the statements on several times. With this teaching technique useful input was generated."

In our conversation, Els also emphasized that the pedagogical approaches were often focused on the process which for her: "stimulated to sometimes take a step back, to think. Moreover, starting with writing forced me to structure my work."

By discussing their own self-studies with the group, the facilitators also tried to model how the roles of teacher of teachers and researcher can be combined. On her postcard, Janneke suggests to further strengthen this modeling, for example, by also explicitly modeling the writing process (Photo 2, bottom, right side).

*Suggestion 4: Facilitators of self-study trajectories are modeling how to be a teacher educator/researcher and have to choose their pedagogical approaches and examples carefully and accordingly.*

## Final Remarks

In this section, we have shared our Dutch experiences of, and research on, learning together in self-study communities and trajectories over an extended period of time. We have generated new insights about what it means to professionally develop as a



teacher educator and to construct our own personally meaningful professional knowledge of practice.

In this final chapter, we have highlighted some issues that emerged from our conversation about what we have learned while writing this section. Remarkably, attention for meaning, feelings, and emotional aspects seems to be a continuing thread.

Our reflection confirmed Loughran's quote that begins this chapter, i.e., that the development of teacher educators' professional knowledge is intimately tied with understanding of self-identity. We specified this for the Dutch context: for most Dutch teacher educators, self-study research is not a way *to combine* the roles of teacher of teacher and researcher but a way *to extend* their teacher educator role as a teacher of teachers and to explore the role of researcher. We discovered how important it is to take into account that context issues influence the meaning self-study research has on the understanding of teacher educators' identity development.

Our conversations also emphasized the importance of being part of a safe and motivating community while – sometimes struggling with – conducting an individual self-study. We suggest that teaching, learning, and enacting self-study research should always include being part of a community that offers conceptual, methodological, practical, and emotional support.

We also spoke about the rich opportunities that self-study research offers for strengthening what Loughran calls our teaching education “enterprise.” Conducting a self-study helped us to experience students' learning and research challenges. In our conversation, not only the cognitive aspects but also the emotional aspects of these experiences became explicit. Examples were shared about the vulnerability that you feel when sharing a video about your teaching and about the importance to receive careful and productive feedback. We feel that these opportunities for multi-level learning deserve explicit attention in teaching and learning self-study research.

The emphasis on the *teacher of teachers'* role in the Netherlands meant that both facilitators and participants in the Dutch trajectories were attentive to the facilitators' modeling and their choice of pedagogical approaches, an aspect that until now did not receive much research attention. But these pedagogical approaches matter. Hence, we recommend that facilitators chose their approaches carefully and also, as Jorien added, ‘keep an open mind and heart for the participants.’

We hope that the chapters of this section support the overriding aim of self-study: that by examining our own practice and sharing the outcomes with others, we contribute to the self-study world as a whole.

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