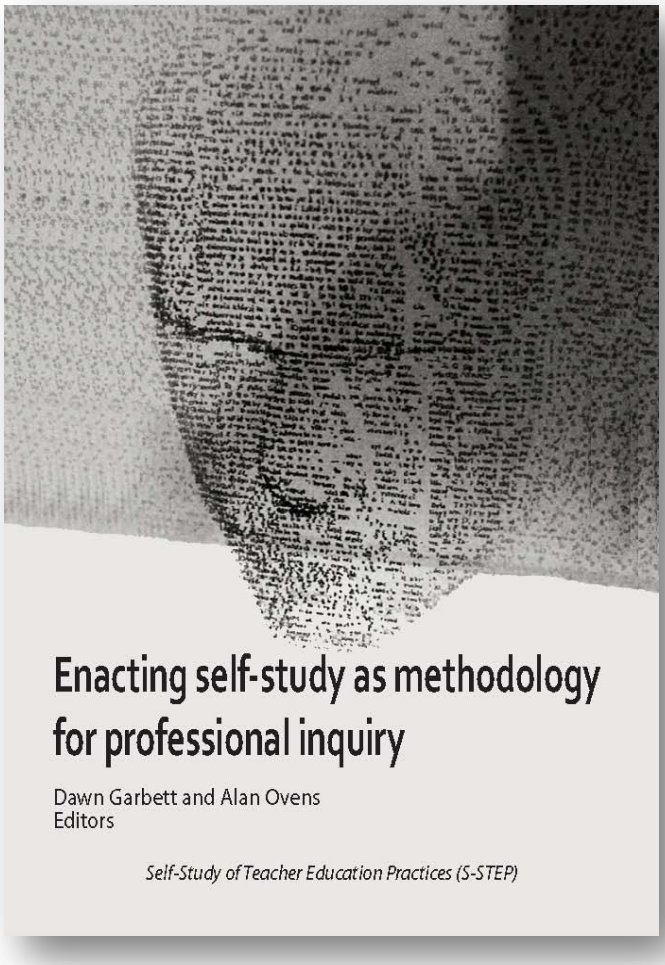
Survivors' oaths: Collaborating beyond survival memos

Dawn Garbett, Constanza Tolosa, Alan Ovens and Rena Heap



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Enacting self-study as methodology for professional inquiry captures our individual and collective quests to deepen our understanding of the complex practices of teaching about teaching. Self-study methodology has transcended political and cultural boundaries to enhance understanding of "other", crossed table and coffee conversations to deepen appreciation within institutions, supported teachers transitioning from classrooms to university, sustained mid-career academics to achieve new appreciation for the complexity of their roles, and enthused experienced academics to reflect on their expertise and question anew what it is to be a self-studying professional. In this edited collection, the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) community share how they have explored and probed their own understanding of how they might better teach student teachers to teach. The chapters are loosely grouped around the themes of enactment, discovery, inclusivity, and application.

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This self-study reports on the sense four academics made of collaboration as we explored our teacher education practices through engaging with technology. It was never intended to be the primary focus of the project but nonetheless it is a story that Dawn, in particular, feels compelled to tell as part of the group's research journey. It is a story of loss, discovery, recovery, integration and hope.

As teacher educators working in a research-intensive university we have used self-study to maintain our focus on teaching and our students' learning while also contributing to the academy (Loughran, 2002). In our university, teaching is not accorded high status but, in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, the teaching component of our jobs is considerable. We are all ex-teachers with backgrounds in primary or secondary school teaching, science, physical education or languages. We are now the core of a larger group of early adopters of mobile technology, curious about ways to maximise students' engagement in learning networks which are enabled through our courses using personal interactive technologies (Sharples, Taylor & Vavoula, 2007, Cochrane, 2010). The university initially supported our project to enhance our personal use of such technology and our teaching about technology through a small Learning Enhancement Grant in 2012. We supported our professional development and deepened our understanding of the impact of using technology on our professional identities through using Brookfield's (1995) "survival memos" to elicit foundational knowledge and assumptions. We reported aspects of this research in the self-study literature (Heap, Garbett, Ovens, Tolosa, 2014; Tolosa, Heap, Ovens & Garbett, in press). We also reported our findings in different fora where technology was more prominent (for example, Ovens, Garbett, Heap, 2015; Ovens, Garbett, Heap, & Tolosa, 2013) but enhancing our teaching and students' learning was the main purpose of this grant.

We changed tack in 2014/2015 with the assistance of a larger Faculty Research Development Fund grant to extend our collaboration into partnerships with practicing teachers. We four partnered

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with critical friends who were practicing teachers in our respective sectors and curriculum areas. Hierarchical structures were imposed on us at the eleventh hour when we were presenting our application for this grant. A restriction on the number of Principal Investigators who could present our project to the selection panel meant that Rena and Constanza were named as PIs and presented our application while Alan and Dawn were named as associate investigators. In effect, we adopted differentiated roles imposed upon us in order to secure funding. At the time there was disagreement between us as to the impact that this might have on our collaborative endeavour.

Collaboration in the literature

As is typical in higher education we all had other research interests, teaching schedules, service commitments and personal agendas which competed for priority and time in our busy academic lives. While collaboration is considered the norm in self-study methodology (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) collaborative research was undervalued by institutional policies for promotion and tenure. Like Barak (2015) we recognised that "our academic background and norms of the community steer us towards monovalent appreciation of research and practice; although praising collaborations we still look for who is the first author" (p.59). And so, typically, senior academics were encouraged to write individually in preference to co-authoring papers and to assert first authorship in collaborations. Those who were focused on continuation or promotion processes had a heightened awareness that multiple-authored outputs could have a diminished impact in their curricula vitae.

The performative behaviours required of teacher educators, viz to teach, research and provide service, were measured against the institution's standardised criteria – for example, quantifiable research outputs; numbers of post graduate students supervised; grant money awarded – and also forced us into competitive and isolated ways of working (Selkrig & Keamy, 2015). Hence the tensions manifested within the group by pressures in the wider Faculty such as restricting the number of co-PIs named in the funding application to two.

Whether it is essential or congenial, collaboration is certainly pervasive among self-study research in some form or another, predicated as self-study is "on an ontology that takes self-identity as relational" (Gemmell, Griffiths & Kibble, 2010, p. 169). Griffiths and Poursanidou (2005) conclude that "self-study emphasises each individual taking responsibility for her or his own agency within a professional life and recognising that doing so can be a powerful catalyst for change" (p. 154). But they also draw attention to the discomfort that collaborators face when questions arise "not only about one's personality but also about professional roles and perceived power and status (p. 155).

Going forward, it was important that we took the opportunity to discuss honestly, at least amongst ourselves, where we hoped our continued collaboration would take us. This study created a space and a process through which to address potential barriers to open and honest communication between us. It was an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to self-study and strengthen our collaborative community going forward (Martin & Dismuke, 2015).

Aims

We created an opportunity to support one another to explore the gap between who we were and who we would like to be (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) with regards the implementation of technology in our teacher education practice. In doing so, we disturbed the hegemonic messages about collaboration that were swirling around us, at least for ourselves. In this chapter we outline the trigger that prompted us to explore the nature of the understandings and misunderstandings about what it means to collaborate.

Methods

Dialogic self-study conversations (Placier, Pinnegar, Hamilton & Guilfoyle, 2005) have been the basis of our previous self-study research. Whereas we had used survival memos (Brookfield, 1995) to give a retrospective view of what had happened in previous work (Heap, Garbett, Ovens,

Tolosa, 2014), our new approach was future-focused. Dawn devised a generative writing prompt to explicate the "baggage" we were carrying and to reaffirm our commitment to the project.

The triggering questions were adapted from Block (2008), who proposes that '[t]he essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole' (p.1). The trigger pertinent to this chapter was:

> *What is the story about the project that I hear myself telling most often, that I am wedded to and take my identity from? What are the payoffs I receive from holding on to this story? What is my attachment to this story costing me?*

We agreed to set a time limit to write for no more than an hour on this and the other questions. Writing with a time constraint encouraged us to write without censoring or crafting our responses. As we wrote, we kept in mind Frigga Haug's (1987) memory work method to foreground experience, emotions and closely held interpretations of personal narratives. We each made copies of what we called our Survivor's oaths and shared them with the others at a face-to-face meeting held a few days later. Each person's response was read quietly by the others in its entirety. The group then discussed each person's response to the first question, followed by a round to discuss each of the subsequent questions. The writer did not defend or justify their response but listened to the other's interpretations of it. In discussion we moved between the subjectivity of these experiences, emotions and interpretations and the more distanced and academic processes of collectively theorising the meanings of those experiences.

Notes were taken by a self-designated scribe and uploaded to Google docs. The 3-hour meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis of the transcribed audio-tapes and original survivor's oaths is ongoing. Here we focus on the gap identified between our espoused claims for collaboration and other perceptions that have been surfaced through discussion. The process of delving into the written oaths and transcribed discussions enables nuanced understanding to become transparent. As we have remembered our experiences and brought them to life through written and spoken words, they have become open to nuanced interpretation. Since Dawn has drawn out this story, it is further imbued with her subjectivity. Since 18 months has passed between writing and discussing our survivors' oaths and writing this paper, other experiences, new understandings and different appreciations have been brought to bear on this telling.

Outcomes

Collaboration and self-study had been important aspects of Dawn and Rena's friendship, forged over a decade of teaching and researching a primary science course together (e.g. Garbett & Heap, 2011). Dawn and Alan, married for 30 years, had researched the impact of peer teaching on their practice (e.g. Garbett & Ovens, 2012). Constanza and Rena had worked together as Deputy Heads of our School. Our earlier Learning Enhancement Grant had been an opportunity to work together as a foursome. We enjoyed each other's company and the discussions we had around teacher education pedagogy. It was no surprise then that the dominant story we told was that working collaboratively with our peers was something that we all valued. Written comments included "I enjoy our workgroup and the abilities, personalities and perspectives it brings together." "This has been a hugely successful collaboration for everyone involved…I know my teaching and research have been enhanced by this project" and "where would I be, personally and professionally, without the academic conversations, the collegiality, the sharing of ideas and the ongoing support of this community of practice?" In the discussion, Constanza commented that "the productivity of the collective and the joy of the collective" had come through strongly in all of our responses.

However, when the written story was unpacked further through the face to face discussion, different stories were exposed. We acknowledged that the response from colleagues when we expressed how productive and worthwhile our collaboration had been was likely to be muted, as if it was a given that collaboration would be productive. The unspoken message from them was that it took several co-authored publications to equal a single sole-authored one. But we agreed within the group that the value of collaboration for us was more than being a productive unit and was not only measured in terms of outputs. Rather, the collaboration was a generative space that enabled us a gain

a different perspective on our teaching that was not possible without the dialogic discussions. It was for this reason that we remained committed to working collaboratively to examine our teaching.

Opportunities lost

The enhanced productivity measures were, perhaps, as a result of our collective rather than collaborative efforts. As a collective we discussed "authorship" issues as transparently as possible. We were savvy as a group and had targeted conferences that we wanted to present our work at and who might have funding and a particular interest in attending specific conferences since we could not afford the time or costs to attend all of them together. We also brainstormed journals or edited books that would be appropriate for different outputs. We negotiated who would lead the writing or presentation of each output. In this way we shared the first authorship between contributors. However, we did not have a full and frank discussion as to how we would share the process or responsibility of preparing different aspects of our work for submission to conferences or journals. We agreed that contributions should fairly represent the effort that each put into the work and, in an ideal world, that this effort should amount to more than casting a critical eye over the basis of a new paper or abstract. However, in our busy lives, this is what happened in some cases as we focused on papers we were "leading". We recognised that some papers and presentations could proceed on this basis but there was a different (but uncommunicated) expectation of what it meant to take a leading role in writing a truly collaborative paper which was not surfaced until after the abstract for this book was submitted for review. This was an example of a lost opportunity to collaborate, although in fairness, time, as always, was pressured for us all and pragmatism ruled the day.

Discoveries

With regards to the collaborative endeavour to study the implementation of technology and the impact on our pedagogy, Dawn felt restricted. She wrote of "sitting at the back of the bus" and asked, "Can I travel the same road in my own car and feel more autonomous and confident?" For her, "there is a danger in doing everything as a group if everyone is not acknowledged for their contribution." Since its inception, our collaboration had produced several outputs but it had also "melted the various voices and eliminated their uniqueness" (Barak, 2015, p.58). In the discussion around this discomfort the others questioned who was responsible for the way Dawn positioned herself. The others affirmed the strength she brought to the group. For example Rena said "We all position you way up here, but you position yourself way down here." But Dawn's comments drew attention to the counter story that was told about being part of a collaborative and how that positioned us in others' eyes. Dawn felt as though she had to be identified as a driver rather than being in the back seat. The others acknowledged that the "flak that you get, which we don't necessarily see, is that as an Associate Professor you are not leading [research] in the faculty" in the ways that might be seen as more appropriate and typical. Alan reflected on his own position. "I'm reluctant to move up because then expectations go up. So at this level I can be exceeding expectations, the next level, suddenly I'm just meeting them." There were research standards commensurate with the position of Associate Professor that Dawn was obliged to meet (Garbett, 2013, 2016). Even though she had written that she had developed resilience and fortitude through the promotion process, that self-study had left her feeling exposed. As she confided to the others, "I still think to myself, Oh gee, if they have read that [paper] then they know that I know that they thought my research…isn't up to scratch." On reflection, reconciling whether or not others thought that self-study research measured up to their standards of scholarship was a moot point. Dawn discovered that her orientation towards self-study was responsible for her confidence and enthusiasm for both teaching and researching. It was this orientation that she brought to the collaboration that the others acknowledged. Self-study gave her the kudos within the group to position herself at the front of the bus.

From Alan's perspective, how individuals were positioned by others and either accorded recognition or status was another example of the gap between his experience of rhetoric and reality. In reference to what had transpired when Rena and Constanza had been named as PIs and Alan and Dawn as associate investigators, Alan said during our discussion "There's an example of, OK, I can understand the logic and we want to support people … and yet when it comes out [as a public announcement] 'Well, hang on… we were told something else!" This was another example

of institutional rhetoric running counter to our idealism.

Recovering perspective

We stayed on this theme - Dawn questioned why we should need external recognition and acknowledgement. Alan said, "[Research] is obviously uppermost in people's minds when they collaborate so there is a need to FIGJAM* it [which means euphemistically to tell everyone how they good they are individually]. Dawn recognised that she could manipulate the situation to claim that she was "the Queen Bee" She went on to say, tongue in cheek "Hell yes, if it wasn't for me you wouldn't have a clue." On a more sombre note she continued, "It's the way we are positioned by the institution, by academia, by this machine that is just really chewing up people and spitting out research… I'm railing against that rather than anything else". At that point she asked for the conversation to move on.

Integrating parts of the whole

Retrospectively, this transcribed conversation, reconstituted here in our memory of lived experience is an important moment when we identified individual's unique positions in the collaborative landscape. As Hamilton and Pinnegar (2013) wrote:

The interplay of trying to improve our action to match our beliefs and being able to express understanding of enacting such beliefs points to the reason that collaboration and meta-collaboration are so fundamental to self-study of practice methodology. It points to the ways in which talk, embodied knowledge, integrity, and shared visions are vital to collaboration's topography. (p.86)

Our discussions highlighted that collaboration is not an easy road to navigate and like all relationships, requires constant work and communication. There are highs and lows; benefits and disadvantages. Having the opportunity to vent frustration and annoyance about perceived or real slights gave us a stronger, more ethical, basis for our on-going collaboration and diminished the gap between how we thought we were perceived by others and how we wanted to be perceived by each other.

Hope (springs eternal)

Our vision for this collaboration going forward is strengthened by the individual contributions we each make to the whole. Within the group, we vowed to "to take risks and talk about them openly" in order to keep challenging ourselves and to continue learning "about the pedagogical shifts" that were taking place as we grappled with technology. We promised "to go boldly where everyone else [was] going with our eyes wide open" with regards to technology. We assured one another that collectively we would keep each other attuned to the "unique affordances" offered by it but more importantly we recognised that it was the collaborative self-study that afforded us the opportunity and imperative to study our teaching so intently. We have much to learn from one another. We will keep troubling the norms of practice. Our on-going collaborative commitment is to be both academically generous and gracious with ourselves, other colleagues and our students.

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