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Exploring Dissertation Interests Through  
Self-Study as a Way of Knowing

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## Exploring Dissertation Interests Through Self-Study as a Way of Knowing

We are two doctoral students at George Mason University concentrating in Assistive Technology (AT) and Educational Psychology. As first year students to the doctoral program we have come together individually and jointly explore self-study as a way of knowing. We are optimistic that self-study will shed light on how we came to select our dissertation topics/areas of concentration.

### *Definitions of Self-Study*

After an extensive review of the literature for a definition of self-study, we discovered that no definitive definition exists. Rather a few definitions are in existence, which share a common emphasis on reflection (Hamilton, 1998; Samaras, 2002). Reflection refers to systematic, critical examination of ones actions and the context of those actions (Samaras). Hamilton provides insight into the results of reflective inquiry, relating the result of self-study to a change in the problematic situation being researched. “Self” is another key element of self-study that distinguishes it from other types of research methodologies, placing emphasis on the “self” within forms of action, and in relation to other people, ideas, and events (Hamilton). In addition, Loughran (1996) refers to self-study as a modeling and think-aloud approach to teaching that illustrates ways of helping student teachers to learn about teaching.

### *Origins of Self-Study*

Self-study originated out of four developments within education: naturalistic inquiry methods, the Reconceptualist movement, increased teacher education research, and the return of action research. The main focus of self-study has been Teacher Education (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) with audiences among teachers (Tidwell, 2002), teacher educators (Senese, 2002), and

programs and institutions (Lourie, Stackman, Drevdahl & Purdy, 2002). The only Self-Study Special Interest Group (SIG) at this time is the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP), formed in 1992 (Bullough & Pinnegar). Although self-study originated among teacher educators, new audiences (e.g., healthcare) are being drawn to this methodology.

*Purposes of Self-Study.* The five purposes of self study developed by Hamilton (1998) are to do the following: (1) uncover the real story of what was going on (in the classroom); (2) exert political power; (3) construct new knowledge; (4) enhance participant self-knowledge; and (5) celebrate achievements (of a course).

*Requirements of Self-Study.* According to LaBostky (2004) there are four requirements for practicing self-study. First is the necessity for the study to be an improvement-aimed, self-initiated, self-focused, study showing evidence that a change has occurred through reframed thinking as well as transformed practice. As noted by Northfield (1996), the most significant outcome of self-study is associated with the way researchers perceive a given situation. The perceptions of researchers are accompanied by the shift in self-beliefs as well as a deeper understanding of the situation under review. In the present study, we are looking at our perceptions towards why we are interested in our dissertation topics/areas of study.

Second is the interactive nature of self-study that uses collaboration and interaction “to confirm or challenge our developing understanding” (LaBostky, 2004). The opportunity to see a situation from the perspective of another participant in the self-study encourages reframed thinking, which is accomplished through collaboration. Collaboration is essential to ensure the success of self-study (Northfield, 1996). Having critical friends represents one approach to collaboration in self-study, which allows opportunities to gain insight into your study through another person’s perspectives (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Critical friends ensure that self-

study makes sense and ask for clarifications. They offer alternative interpretations of research findings and validate the experiences you have reported (Barnes, 1998). It is crucial for critical friends to have a great level of self-confidence and trust to feel comfortable sharing their stories. In our collaboration, we have agreed to be each other's critical friends to ensure the presence of alternative views.

Thirdly, self-study is a methodology that employs a myriad of methods, primarily qualitative, for data collection and analysis (LaBostky, 2004). The reframing of practice is accompanied by supporting evidence possible through numerous data collection methods. Data collection techniques will depend greatly upon the various methods of self-study, which we will explore more in the following section.

Lastly, it is the formalization of the self-study through publication. Making information available to the public further validates the study (LaBostky, 2004). There are different levels of learning from a self-study. People around the globe may find similarities and differences of their roles and efforts and use that information to improve their understanding and/or practices. In addition, making self-study public offers different layers of awareness and comprehension not possible on a private level (Russell, 2002).

#### *Methodology of Self-Study*

Among the various methods of self-study are personal history, developmental portfolio self-study, and collective self-study. For the purposes of our paper we will focus on personal history self-study which looks into self-knowing and reforming a professional identity, modeling and testing effective reflection, and pushing the boundaries of teaching (Samaras, Hicks & Berger, 2004). According to Samaras (2002) the theory of Vygotsky is connected to personal history and has helped her to explore teacher education. The aspects of Vygotsky's (1978) theory

that resonate with self-study include the concepts that social and cultural influences shape development, learning occurs during situated and joint activity, cognition is always socially mediated, and education leads development. Methods used specifically in personal history research include the following: reflective writing, journaling, audiotapes, practical argument technique about a specific practice, critical reflection after an event, observations and evaluations, interviews, ethnographical evaluations, memory work, videotapes, students' evaluations, rating scales and written comments (Fitzgerald, Farstad & Deemer, 2002).

According to Lighthall (2004) some features of self-study are used more than others. Lighthall (2004) identified six features of self-study that occur most frequently (collaboration, self-study of practices, method, autobiography, reform of program, and theory/conceptualization) and eight that are used less frequently (contribution from other disciplines, values, teacher education curriculum, students' Self-study, relationship, performing art(s), and biography and outside audience).

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) developed 14 guidelines for conducting self-study research, 4 of which are most relevant to our inquiry into self-study as a way of knowing. First is the notion that self-study should promote insight and interpretation. The other three guidelines refer to autobiographical self-study research indicating that the research must: (1) directly engage personal history and take be honest; (2) seek to enhance personal learning and the knowledge of others; and (3) offer a "fresh perspective on established truths". Each of these guidelines is addressed in our individual sections of the paper.

To address the validity of self-study, multiple researchers have examined it in terms of personal reflection, professional development, and as a literary form (Feldman, 2003). According to Feldman, in order for a self-study to be valid it must "provide clear and detailed description"

of how the researchers selected data and conducted data collection and constructed meaning. Northfield (1996) highlights the importance of personal development in self-study research, which leads to the generation of new knowledge, thus providing opportunities for professional development. Validity is also strengthened through the triangulation of data. Furthermore, self-study research needs to demonstrate “evidence of the value of the changes” that occurred in the problematic situation being researched (Feldman).

#### *Personal inquiry into self-study*

In the next section of this paper we will explore our individual understandings of how self-study is relevant to our research interests, which focus on our doctoral studies. The main focus of this project is to help us identify how our different ways of knowing shaped our interests in professional life and research interests. In addition, this is an opportunity for us to explore how self-study, as a way of knowing, can help us to better understand our current work and goals for the future.

#### *Deanna's Way of Knowing Self-Study*

*Journal March 14, 2006 (Barcelona, Spain)*

*In 1987, I was 7 years old, living in the rural town of Paxton, IL. My life revolved around school, and church activities at the local Baptist church where my father was the pastor. I started school when I was 4, perhaps this I was too young to start at that time. When at school I did my work but was more interested in playing with my friends. My inability to improve academically through reading classes during the school day gave my teacher reason to have me repeat 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. My parents and I participated in the decision but I immediately realized that something had changed. I had changed. For the first time in my life I felt like a failure and was insulted by the decision. I would no longer progress in school with my peers. However, I soon*

*realized that my two best friends would now be in the same grade as me and that being retained was a good thing in this regard.*

*Since graduation from high school in 1998, I have worked diligently in college without taking a semester off. I have always been motivated by an inner drive to regain the year I lost repeating 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Now that I am a doctoral student, I feel as though I'm finally catching up. I am looking to self-study as a way of knowing in order to reevaluate my dissertation interests after two semesters of doctoral classes. I wonder if they are the same as they were in my original goal statement. I believe that self-study will enable me to systematically explore my research interest in student retention.*

*My definition of self-study.* I chose to define Self-Study as a way of knowing in order to explore a way to understand my reasons for choosing student retention as my topic for my dissertation. Self-Study is different than any other research methodology. Its unique qualities are the reflection/exploration of the "I" in research. This allows the researcher to see how they can improve what they are doing, which leads to meaningful insights into their field(s) of expertise.

Although the origin of Self-Study is teacher inquiry, reflection, and action research, I am exploring it as both a researcher and a student. This form of inquiry is different than any other form of research I have previously explored. As stated previously, it will enable me to systematically explore my research interest. The emphasis Self-Study places on collaboration is another important requirement of its methodology. This is why Anna and I have agreed to work together. As we share our understanding of Self-Study we realize how our interpretations are both different and similar.

As previously stated in the literature review, self-study is introspective, it is essential to disclose the information gleaned from the study to the public. The public in this informal self-

study will be the classroom. I hope this study will encourage other students to explore self-study and give them insight in to how to identify their research interests, particularly for their dissertation is more clarity is needed. I found clarification by search for educational events that were meaningful in the past because they shaped my future. Therefore I am interested in researching a topic that will shape the future of the educational system in America.

*Questioning Vygotskian principles in self-study.* To further inquire into Self-Study, I decided to spend time reflecting on questions I have regarding Self-Study. To do so I selected Vygotsky's theory, which Anastasia Samaras (2002) connects to self-study.

*Journal March 15, 2006 (Autonomous University of Barcelona in Barcelona, Spain)*

*How are Vygotskian principles intertwined with Self-Study? I ask myself this question as I sit on a bench in the communication building at the University of Barcelona, Spain. I travelled here by car this morning at 7:30am to arrive here at 8am. I ask myself the following questions regarding 4 major principles of Vygotsky's theory:*

*1) Have social and cultural influences shaped my development?*

- *Most definitely, I have learned a great deal from my friends that come from all parts of the world, they have taught me about life as they know it, and I have adapted some of their habits into my own life. For instance, I now cook chicken curry and brochetta due to the influence of my friend from Czech Republic. I eat yogurt for dessert because this is common in Spain and I think it is healthy.*

*2) Does learning occur during situated and joint activity?*

- *Of course, I agree, I use both methods to learn.*

*3) Is cognition always socially mediated?*

- *Often I find myself making connections to new information by talking it through with another person.*

*4) The fourth question is, does education lead development?*

- *If I didn't believe in this I wouldn't be studying so much.*

*Approach to answering questions about my interests.* To answer the questions of my real interests I will reflect on my interest in student retention. At the root of my interest is how decisions are made. Secondary to that is how policies and procedures develop and are implemented. Tertiary (third) is the interventions used as part of the protocol to make an informed decision.

Reflection on my research questions, in the subsequent section, has helped me narrow down my research interests for my dissertation. Unfortunately, my original goals statement does not clearly reflect my dissertation interests. It reads, "My goal beyond obtaining my PhD is to continue conducting research with a research firm that will allow me to apply my education and technical skills to research studies that will ultimately effect positive, healthy, social change." There is no mention in my original goals statement of my proposed dissertation topic. However, I do recall it being a topic of discussion during my program interview. Regarding research methods, I wonder if and when I should worry about the method. Will I focus on adults (school administration, teachers, and parents) or children? Will I use interviews or quantifiable data? Will self-study be a piece of the research?

It is my desire to change school policies surrounding retention decisions. I believe they should be standardized and that procedures should not change for cultural differences (e.g., a non-English speaking parent deserves equal treatment to an English speaking parent. – the school must provide translation). My focus is on school policy standardization. I see a need to explore

policies surrounding decision making procedures, their implementation and development. This would include interventions in place that occur prior to retention. Based on an analysis of current policies surrounding student retention (NCLB, Response to Intervention, etc.) this would enable me to compare best practices and methods of adapting multiple communities (e.g., tribal, rural, urban).

*Questions to narrow the focus of my dissertation topic.* In order to narrow the focus of my research interest within student retention I have developed the following questions that I have considered exploring.

- 1) Am I most interested in adherence to procedures based on cultural differences?
  - No. This was not an issue when I was retained.
- 2) What about how do policies differ by state, county, district, school?
  - a. Who implements the policies?
  - b. Who makes the decisions?
  - Yes. This is essential to know in order to develop policies that target the appropriate party.
- 3) What interventions are used prior to retaining a student?
  - This is of interest to me because I was in a reading class.

*Understanding of self-study.* Self-study is helpful for students as they seek to understand themselves and their relation to those around them. Self-study is particularly useful for professionals when exploring ways to improve their practice. By looking reflectively into my own understanding of my past, I was able to identify areas of research interest for my dissertation. It is my belief that the self-study methodology is an effective way for other students to identify their research interests for the dissertation as well.

*Anna's Way of Knowing Self-Study*

*Journal October, 2001 (East Carolina University, Greenville, NC)*

*Since the first day I came to America, I wanted to make something useful for my colleagues back in Russia. So, when it came to choosing a topic for my final Master's project in the field of special education at East Carolina University (ECU), Greenville, NC, I found myself contemplating the idea of making something that I could take back home and introduce to Russian specialists. I wanted it to be something that would offer a new approach to support and educate children with disabilities. During my course of study at ECU I was fortunate to be part of the Assistive Technology (AT) laboratory where I learned many different AT devices and software that can forever change the life of an individual with any type of disability. So I knew I had a winner for my final project.*

*I decided to develop a CD-Rom in two languages entitled "Assistive Technology for Students with Learning Disabilities" which included examples of lesson plans demonstrating how technology can be integrated into a curriculum and as well as interviews with teachers currently using AT. Again, the main purpose of the project was to make a Russian version and take it back home. I initially developed an English version to present to my committee. However, when I started looking for teachers to interview, currently using AT, I came to realize that there were only 3 teachers in Pitt County who had ever heard of AT. I was truly shocked by lack of awareness. I wondered how teachers with accesses to AT resources were not interested in using them. Needless to say, my project was most valuable to Pitt County teachers who were introduced to AT via my CD-Rom. I translated it into Russian and sent it to many universities in my region. Several courses were developed based on my CD-Rom at Saratov State University,*

*Russia but I think teachers in Pitt County benefited from it the most because they had a chance to apply their new knowledge.*

*Why self-study?* Quite some time has passed since my Master's project was completed and yet research shows that while the awareness of AT has increased dramatically overtime, teachers are still not using technology for their students with disabilities. This has led me to become very passionate about finding out why teachers do not utilize AT. Self-study will play an important role as I seek to answer this question. It will allow me to investigate my original plans when entering the doctoral program to focus on AT implementation.

An even bigger benefit offered by self-study is practitioner inquiry. The role of self-study in teacher education helps teachers to understand their teaching and their students learning, thus improving it. Although I'm currently not a teacher, I believe self-study can help me to look at my relationship with technology and transfer that knowledge to find better ways to educate teachers about technology. While I will be studying myself, I believe my findings can relate to others. I want to go into more depth and see how my own relationship with technology developed. I also hope to find other self-studies conducted by teachers where they reveal their thoughts about computers and possibly even AT, thus enabling me to better understand and address their concerns.

### *Personal Experience with Technology*

*Journal, April 1, 2006 (Library of Congress, Washington, DC)*

*I'm sitting in the Library of Congress looking at dozens of people working on laptops and it reminds me of my first time with a computer. I was nearly 16 years old and my older sister bought a computer to work on her dissertation. I was very proud because none of my friends had a computer. I showed all of them the monitor and they were very impressed. However, I never*

*turned on my sister's computer. I was terrified of it and thought of nothing other than messing up her stuff. I never touched the keyboard wither because of the F1 and F2 buttons etc. I was sure one of them would crash everything. It took me 10 years to overcome my fears.*

*Characteristics of self-study.* I had to analyze my fears. So one day I tried all those “F” buttons on the top of the keyboard to make sure nothing bad would happen. Moreover, throughout my coursework I heard many teachers tell me how afraid they were of computers and other forms of technology. Due to their fear and the fear I experienced, I believe that studying myself will enable me to think of the way to make teachers comfortable with technology. I truly believe that as they become comfortable they will use technology, just as I did in my experience. I believe in the collaborative nature of self-study. I agree that collaboration is critical for self-study because it requires commitment to checking data and interpretations with others (Hamilton, 1998). I believe that collaboration with Deanna enhances my self-study because it gives me the opportunity to see what another person thinks about my speculations and if she sees the same relation between my story and technology integration as I do. I hope to eventually engage more people in my study by making my research public and make them interested in examining themselves by conducting their own self-studies. I believe a large level of inquiry, encompassing multiple people can contribute to possible solutions to the problem of technology abandonment.

*Role of Vygotsky in my self-study.* Vygotsky's work is used as a part of self-study when we explore sociocultural aspects of who we are and what our practices are (Samaras et al., 2004). I believe Vygotsky's work plays a larger role in my self-study. Besides the impact of social and cultural influences on development, I am very interested in investigating the role of social interactions between children and their parents. I am first and foremost interested in investigating

how parents can influence their children and their future careers and competencies. Furthermore, Vygotsky's principle of situated and joint activity is very important for ensuring technology implementation. It is impossible to know everything about AT and other forms of technology. Even AT specialists communicate their ideas and cases to their colleagues to make sure they are aware of the latest hardware or software on the market. If we want teachers to implement technology more often, they need to know how to do this, and they also need teams of people they can refer to for advice.

### *Career in Special Education*

*Journal, April 1, 2006 (Library of Congress, Washington DC)*

*Why have I chosen a career in special education? What made me so passionate about it? My mother always tells people that I'm getting my degree in Pedagogy rather than special education because it is a failure to work with people with disabilities in Russia. People who can get a good education and become a doctor, lawyer, or at least a teacher are valued by Russian society. Whereas persons that choose to work in the field of Defectology, the Russian equivalent for special education, are not valued by society. Even the name "defectology" demonstrates the attitudes towards the profession. Despite this I am not ashamed of what I do and try to educate people back home about how wonderful, challenging, and rewarding it is to work with people with disabilities.*

*When I look back to my childhood I see that although I never had a disability, I always felt somewhat disabled. I was growing up with a truly talented and very successful sister and my parents always thought I had only a second-class quality. This attitude affected me for all my life and I have always worked really hard to prove them wrong. Although I never earned a "B" in my life, I remember feeling useless and unsuccessful all my life. I think this makes me so*

*passionate about advocating for the abilities of people with disabilities. I am still trying to demonstrate to people (including my own parents) that success has different faces and everybody can be successful in this or that way.*

*Importance of self-study.* Self-study is important in my work because I really want all special and general education teachers to have the ability to see the qualities of their students with disabilities. I think that if they can see that, teachers will be more willing to discover and explore ways to let those qualities to blossom, which in many cases is possible with the help of technology. Teachers need to be taught how to be advocates willing to request more technology resources, training, and support from school administration.

*Determining my research questions.* By reflecting on how I feel about the topic of technology use, for students with disabilities, has led me to a deeper understanding of my research interests. First of all, I feel that one of the most important problems facing schools today is the problem of technology implementation. Nothing really makes sense if teachers are not going to implement it. Researchers can go above and beyond conducting studies, proving the effectiveness of AT, developing new devices and programs but all of it is useless if teachers are not going to use them. So based on my own experiences with technology, I'm very interested in the reasons, barriers that prevent teachers from technology implementation. I cannot say right now how I will approach this topic but I want to look into how collaboration and joint activities can support teachers and make them more comfortable with technology. I am also interested in exploring the influence of socio-cultural differences and technology implementation. I'm seriously considering using self-study research methods to work with teachers to determine their past experiences, their educational background, and their attitudes towards the abilities of their students with disabilities as an influence on their use of AT. My main goal is to make sure that

available resources are used to improve possibilities for better education and quality of life for people with disabilities. Looking back at my original goal statement I still think that it is a shame not to use technology when it is so obtainable as apposed to specialists in other countries that are not exposed to what is possible.

*Understanding of self-study.* This project really enhanced my understanding of self-study. I can see how helpful it can be in order to improve practices regardless of a job description. I think it is important to remember that self-study leads to learning about individual self and it can and should be used not only by teachers and teacher educators. It really looks like self-study discipline develops that way. When I first heard about a self-study I imagined that it would be only about reflections. Through this project I learned about all possible data collections methods. I keep thinking about the time when I taught in public school. I wish I knew about self-study. I could really benefit from creating a self-portrait or analyzing video and audio records from my lessons. I can see now how the question about generalizability as well as validity can be addressed through sharing and discussing your data with others. This characteristic of self-study also makes it more appealing to me because I really enjoy collaboration.

#### *Collaborative Experience*

We return to a joint voice to reflect on our collaboration during our joint inquiry into self-study as a way of knowing. It is important to note that we decided to write our paper jointly because we believed it would allow for consensus building to occur, which we found to be true. Throughout the collaboration we were in daily communication with one another by email, phone, and face-to-face dialogue, which allowed us to effectively monitor our progress and our growing understanding of self-study. We took collective notes during face-to-face conversations about what our next steps will be and new thoughts about self-study.

We took turns writing the joint literature review section. Smith (1998) in his study raised a question about the involvement of self-study experts in projects to offer invaluable information and advice to participants. Due to Deanna's participation this semester in the Special Topics course on self-study research, she was well informed about self-study, providing support to Anna in the way of materials on self-study and guidance for the literature review. In addition, Deanna provided Anna with much needed and appreciated editing suggestions. This project helped both of us in different ways. Deanna was able to investigate self-study as a research methodology even further while Anna was learning the basics. Anna was attentive to Deanna's comments regarding the literature review and approved of her revisions. Individual sections were written after the first draft of the literature review and were swapped for feedback. These sections included reflective journal entries as well as our personal explanations of the knowledge we have drawn from those reflections. Being critical friends also helped us to explore the meanings of our data. We both offered helpful suggestions, during several discussions, providing each other with motivation and new insights that helped us better understand our roots of our interests.

Our exploration of self-study further clarified the paths that led us toward our doctoral studies and research interests within the program. Furthermore, we believe that doctoral students have to choose the topic of their dissertation wisely because it will consume their life for a while. For students that are struggling to identify their dissertation topic, we recommend the use of self-study, which can provide refreshing insight through systematic inquiry. Overall, we came to this collaboration with different backgrounds, strengths and questions. We both believe there is strength in diversity and are in agreement that we were able to complement one another and expand our knowledge of ourselves even further through our collaborative partnership.

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