

Self-Study of Teaching Practices

Anastasia Samaras has always been fascinated by how people learn with each other, especially through reflection and dialogue. “Regardless of whom I have taught—the young child, the adolescent, or the adult learner—my query has always been the same: What conditions for learning do I create within my own classroom and what difference does that make in my students’ learning?” says Samaras, associate professor and coordinator of the Career Switcher Program in the Graduate School of Education. Although she hadn’t placed a label on this curiosity, it was the beginning of her “self-study” research.

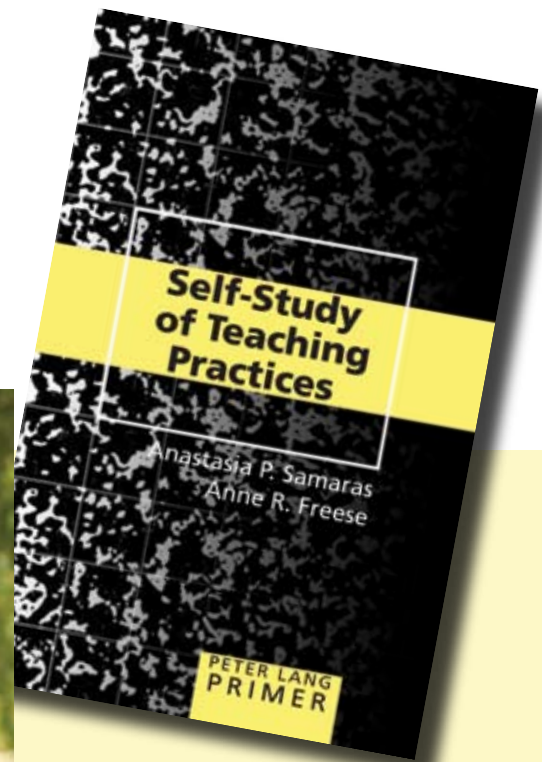
Samaras’ interest led to *Self-Study of Teaching Practices*, published in July by Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. She co-wrote the book with Anne Freese, a University of Hawaii professor who received the 2006 Hawaii Board of Regents’ Medal of Excellence in Teaching. “As the self-study field has continued to develop, we saw the need to clarify and share it with other teachers,” Samaras says. The writing collaboration took place entirely through electronic and cellphone communication, she notes.

The book introduces readers to the field of self-study research and practice, addressing four central areas: purposes, foundations, nature, and guidelines for practice. Moreover, it provides a comprehensive review and synthesis of self-study literature, complete with guidelines and examples of cutting-edge self-study methods.

“School-based and university-based teachers interested in rethinking and reframing their teaching will benefit from reading this book,” Samaras says. “It’s also an excellent primer for undergraduate and graduate education students who are



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searching for guidelines to develop and improve their teaching practice.”

Samaras began her career as a middle school social studies teacher in 1972 and taught at the pre-school, middle school, high school, and college levels. She joined George Mason in 2002. “My teaching is integrated with my experiences growing up in a second-generation immigrant family and my studies in cultural psychology, human development, early childhood education, and teacher education,” she says.

Self-Study of Teaching Practices is not Samaras’ first book on the subject. She also wrote *Self-Study for Teacher Educators: Crafting a Pedagogy for Educational Change* in 2002 and co-edited *Making a Difference in Teacher Education through Self-Study* earlier this year.

“Self-study gave me a new lens for professional and program development,” Samaras adds. “It encouraged me to question my theories, impelled me to rethink and rework the alignment of education methods courses and students’ field experiences, and showed me the value of collaboration and the essentialness of self-study for teachers. Indeed, self-study paradoxically doesn’t involve the self, but necessitates an interpersonal and collaborative dialogue.”

Following are excerpts from *Self-Study of Teaching Practices*.

—Amy Biderman



Why Self-Study of Teaching?

We know firsthand that teaching is a challenging profession. In fact, we have observed and participated in many reform movements on the national, state, and local levels which have attempted to improve schooling. We have listened to legislators speak of standards and a silver bullet, while teachers have struggled to implement mandates. We have heard teachers express their feelings of powerlessness and deprofessionalization as decision-making is being done without their input. In all of our years in the profession, the one thing we acknowledge we can change is ourselves. We want to highlight the power and responsibility we have as teachers, and consider the important role we play in the educational system, no matter what that system is. Self-study is key to building **teacher efficacy**. We believe in investing in human capital and especially in students. We believe in you, as teachers, who work hard towards improving education and society.

We also recognize that new teachers face incredible challenges, forcing nearly half of all newly hired teachers to leave the profession within their first five years because of the challenges they encounter (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Colley, 2002; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). According to Ingersoll (2001), teachers leave the profession largely due to inadequate support, a lack of influence, and poor opportunities for professional development. Low-income schools and children in those schools are particularly at risk of teacher turnover (Haberman, 1991). The self-study of teaching can play an important role in reducing teacher attrition.

We believe that the systematic engagement in the self-study of teaching is a valuable approach for teachers to better understand their teaching and students' learning. It encourages teachers to take charge of their learning and professional development and advance education reform. Self-study is a powerful vehicle that can also help to renew one's passion for teaching. Consequently, self-study advances educational reform efforts in a way that is real and that will make a direct impact in the classroom. Now come along with us to see how self-study relates to your classroom.

What Is Self-Study of Teaching?

We use the words *self* and *study*, **self-study**, as a component of reflection in which teachers systematically and critically examine their actions and the context of those actions as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity (Samaras, 2002). This is in contrast to action based on habit, tradition, or impulse. Self-study teachers inquire thoughtfully and deliberately into their teaching practice and the assumptions embedded in that practice. In the early years of the self-study movement, self-study scholars struggled to define self-study.

Over time, various definitions have emerged from the research experiences of self-study scholars. For example, according to Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998a), "Self-study is the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the 'not self'" (p. 236). Self-study involves a thoughtful look at texts read, the self as a text, the experiences a teacher had, people they have known, and ideas they have considered.

They state:

As we prepare to do a self-study, we imagine, if you will, that each of us is a text to be reviewed for present and absent ideas and intimately distance our selves from ourselves as if we were a text. As with text, we bring to our reading of self, all of the other textual understandings we have developed over time. No two readings are the same. It is as if we are undertaking a **hermeneutic** study of self. What are we reading? What ideas informed the text? Who informed the text? Why are these ideas and people important to the text? In what ways do these ideas and people miss the point? As we read our 'self-text,' we are looking for the events that influenced our thinking. Why do we have these perspectives? How were we influenced by our ethnicity, gender, and social status? (p. 240)

Bullough and Pinnegar (2004) argue that the inclusive nature of self-study and its multiple definitions provoke a continuous and communal conversation about its characteristics. Regardless of the stance, Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998a) conclude "a critical examination of the self's involvement both in aspects of the study and in the phenomenon under study" are central to self-study (p. 240).

Self-study teachers work to articulate knowledge discovered about their practice so their work moves beyond the individual self (Loughran, 2005). The goal of self-study is to investigate questions of practice "that are individually important and also of broader interest to the teacher education community" (Loughran, 2004, p. 9). With colleagues, self-study teachers collectively question and explore the complexities and possibilities in their teaching, and the interplay of their teaching actions within that exploration.

Teachers often recognize a disparity in what they believe and what they actually do in practice. Whitehead (1989) referred to this gap between one's teaching philosophy and actual practice as a **living contradiction**. Self-study encourages teachers to examine their role and responsibilities to their students. It allows teachers to assess their personal and practical theories in a **situated context** or in a particular setting. This reflective assessment contributes to their development as a person and as a professional and extends the knowledge base of teaching. It also models for students that teachers are also learners. **Pedagogy** requires continuous monitoring throughout one's teaching profession. Self-study teachers continuously examine

the perplexities and dilemmas of their teaching practice, while also working to transform the institutional contexts of their work. It is important to note that the self-study of teaching does not have to derive from problematic situations (LaBoskey, 2004b). It can include an exploration of successful teaching and program practices.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2004) discuss self-study as one form of **practitioner inquiry** used by higher education faculty who work in the area of teacher education. They note that self-study often uses biographical, autobiographical, and narrative forms of data collection and analysis. Self-study acknowledges and honors the **postmodern** assumption that the “self” cannot be separated from the research process or in teaching (p. 607). Self-study employs diverse methods and uses primarily **qualitative research** to analyze and represent findings.

Beck, Freese, and Kosnik (2004) describe self-study as an inquiry-oriented approach that is personal, reflective, collaborative, and constructivist. Hence they use the term a **personal-constructivist-collaborative approach** to emphasize important components of self-study. Self-study involves a strong personal reference in that it involves study of the self and study by the self. When we identify our own personal focus of inquiry, we feel an ownership of the research and are more motivated to address our dilemmas of practice and gain a deeper understanding of our teaching practice. Self-study is constructivist because it includes elements of ongoing inquiry, respects personal experience, and emphasizes the role of knowledge construction. The collaborative component of self-study acknowledges the important role of the social construction of knowledge.

Self-Study Dispositions

Before we move on, we want to take a moment and trace back over some of the key concepts we discussed in the previous chapters. The overlap is purposeful so that we can bridge the interconnections of the foundations, nature, and methodology of self-study. We bring your attention to particular characteristics as they relate to the methodology requirements.

Reflection

In Chapter 2, we talked about how the Self-Study School grew partially from the work of scholars working in the areas of teacher inquiry, reflection, and action research. We believe that when you, as a learner, are personally engaged and reflective in your self-study, you will gain an increased understanding of what self-study entails and gain an appreciation of the benefits of self-study. As teachers, we engage in reflection on a daily basis. We reflect on what went well, what did not, and what changes we can make to improve our lessons. As teacher educators, we encourage our students to reflect on and evaluate their lessons, because we view reflection as a critical component of

teachers’ professional growth. Reflection can be viewed as a stepping stone to inquiring into our practice. In addition, we view reflection and inquiry as stepping stones to self-study.

In Chapter 2, we also talked about how self-study differs from reflection and action research. In Chapter 3, we explained how sharing self-study with colleagues makes your work public and accessible, and enhanced as a result of multiple perspectives.

Collaboration

Although reflection can be done individually, collaborative reflection is essential to the self-study process (Loughran, 2004). Collaboration helps us move beyond our own personal views by hearing other perspectives. It provides opportunities for support, new insights into our work, as well as different perspectives. When we engage in individually studying or reflecting on our practice, there is a tendency to be too narrow. Collaboration encourages reflection beyond the self, and includes collective reflection on the issues. This collaborative reflection leads to different perspectives, probing questions, opportunities for clarification, and alternative explanations. These new insights and questions can trigger alternative perspectives and lead to further questions. Collaboration also contributes to a validation of the findings because the analysis extends beyond one’s personal views, thus addressing potential biases.

Openness

We have mentioned how collaboration plays a valuable role in self-study. Yet we acknowledge that sharing our dilemmas and concerns with others can be a bit threatening and scary. In our work with preservice and inservice teachers, we have seen the tendency for many of us to be reluctant to share our questions for fear that they seem too trivial. Alternatively, we may be reluctant to share our personal issues or problems because we do not want to look weak or inadequate. It is hard to reveal our vulnerabilities. One thing about self-study is that it clearly involves risk-taking and a level of vulnerability. Self-study requires a certain mindset or disposition to be willing to share and receive constructive criticism. Participants take risks sharing their work and personal views.

Self-study necessitates a disposition of openness to outside views, questions, and critique. The disposition of the collaborators should be one of openmindedness to new ideas, different perspectives, and probing questions. Therefore, a climate of trust is essential to encourage a free flow of ideas. It takes practice being the supportive collaborator who provides encouragement, while at the same time being a critical friend asking probing questions and critically analyzing the issues. ♦

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