

# Enacting self-study as methodology for professional inquiry

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# From pedagogical confrontations to pedagogical invitations: A self-study of teacher educators' work

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For teacher educators, ethical dilemmas, tensions and 'pedagogical confrontations' (PCs) often arise in day-to-day teaching practice. Education research reveals that self-study researchers usually have a heightened awareness of their obligations to both identify and subsequently act on these dilemmas, tensions and confrontations (Berry, 2007; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2004; East, Fitzgerald & Heston, 2009; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2006; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, 2015; Samaras, 2011). This self-study research focuses on the identification, categorization and analysis of 'pedagogical confrontations' (PCs) and asks what they mean for teacher educators. Through self-study and analysis of these 'pedagogical confrontations' we have come to understand more about the sophisticated and complex nature of teaching. Furthermore, we explore the way in which the use of PCs as a lens for researching practice, has subsequently led to new insights and led to an 'enactment in practice' (Loughran, 2006).

## Context of the study

As teacher educators we are interested in self-study research as a means to discover more about our own work and about the field of teacher education. This chapter builds on our previous research that has focused on the analysis of critical incidents in our practice as teacher educators (McDonough & Brandenburg, 2012; McDonough, 2014). The analysis of critical incidents led to an enhanced understanding of our work prompting changes to our practice. During a recent conference, we discussed recent calls in the Australian and international context for a larger scale research basis for examining teacher education. We were cognisant of the critiques levelled at self-study – that it should move beyond individual accounts – and yet at the same time, were interested in exploring how the experiences of other teacher educators might connect to our own work. This led to the genesis of this particular self-study where we are seeking to uncover the way we experience PCs and the implications of these for our practice. In developing this understanding we are then

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employing this self-study as a platform for wider scale research that examines the PCs of other self-study teacher educator researchers.

### **Pedagogical confrontations**

We are using the term ‘pedagogical confrontations’ (PCs) to signify incidents, interactions or events in learning and teaching which cause us to pause and critically examine our practice. These PCs are unexpected, grounded in everyday practice, and may be philosophical, political, ethical, emotional and/ or organisational in nature. Our use of the term ‘pedagogical confrontations’ has its origin in the identification and examination of critical incidents, a widely used research approach in education (Brandenburg, 2008; Brookfield, 1995; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Tripp, 2012; Woods, 1993). Critical incidents have been defined in a number of ways, but generally they are seen as incidents to which there is no immediate resolution. Our framing of incidents, interactions or events as PCs draws from this body of work, but is distinguished by its pedagogical focus and has direct synergies with the most recent self-study research related to learning about teacher educator identities from experiences of non-personhood (Rice, Newberry, Whiting, Cutri & Pinnegar, 2015). Through examining these confrontations, we seek to come to an understanding of the complex interplay of factors involved in these moments.

### **Aims of the self-study**

The aim of this self-study research is to understand more about the sophisticated and complex nature of teaching and learning in teacher education. We examine the nature and type of PCs teacher educators experience as they seek to design and implement meaningful learning opportunities. Through learning more about these confrontations and the way teacher educators respond to them, we generated an understanding of the challenges facing teacher educators, and the implications for the field. In undertaking this study we examine the following questions:

- What pedagogical confrontations do we experience in our work as teacher educators?
- How do we respond and how does this influence pedagogical practice?
- How has using pedagogical confrontations as a lens in self-study informed and impacted our practice?

### **Research design**

This research draws on self-study methodology, described by Samaras (2011) as “a personal, systematic inquiry situated within one’s own teaching context that requires critical and collaborative reflection in order to generate knowledge” (p. 10). As self-study researchers, we not only conduct the study but also study ourselves (LaBoskey, 2004). In this way, we examined our own practice in order to generate an understanding of PCs. We were also curious as part of this self-study to see if other teacher educators experienced these PCs. However, for the purposes of this chapter we focus only on the findings from our own pedagogical confrontations.

#### *Data collection and organisation*

The process of inquiry into the confrontations was adapted from Kosnik’s (2001) ‘Critical Incident Analysis’ and aimed to provide us with the opportunity to examine the nature of the confrontations and the values underpinning both the confrontation and the response to it. Each of the authors recorded her own PC responding to a set of questions designed to interrogate the context, nature, and meanings of our PCs.

#### *Data analysis process*

We independently read through all PCs to gain an overall sense of the data, and then re-read the responses taking notes, highlighting key concepts, words and phrases, and making interpretative comments (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Collectively, we shared our individual analyses and identified points of convergence and dissonance in order to enhance trustworthiness in the analysis

process (LaBoskey, 2004). For the purposes of this chapter we are going to focus on one theme that emerged in each of our PCs, that of professional roles as teacher educators.

### **Analysis and discussion**

The theme of professional role was identified in each of our recorded PCs, with this referring to how we understood and/or enacted our professional role as a teacher educator. Our PCs were related to tensions within our role and a questioning of our actions and their outcomes. In this section of the chapter we provide an overview of the context of three PCs examined in this chapter and the learning we identified from them.

#### *Context of each pedagogical confrontation*

##### **“Closing the loop” – Robyn**

Robyn had been invited to present a Learning and Teaching Masterclass at a northern Australian University, titled *Transforming Learning and Teaching: Enacting a Vision*. Thirty staff from multiple disciplines attended and the initial tasks were to identify the participants’ needs and wants from the session, together with the identification of two assumptions each person held about learning and teaching. These responses were to be revisited at the conclusion of the session.

The group worked together for almost two hours, covering topics such as assumption hunting, identification and categorization; social and professional network analysis; critical incident identification and analysis; freewrites; Roundtable Reflective Inquiry; and approaches tools and strategies for reflecting in and on practice. Robyn was aware that the session was ‘fast-paced’ and at times, she was feeling frustrated as she was modeling teaching practice that she aims to desist. Robyn found herself apologizing for the pace, and recalls asking the participants to ‘join the dots’ as they progressed. With five minutes to go, Robyn asked the participants for feedback, comments, questions. One person asked, “Can we close one of the loops, like Roundtable Reflective Inquiry or Assumption Hunting?” Robyn asked her to explain the request, knowing that time was limited. The participant said, “you have presented so much and I feel that we haven’t closed the loop on learning. I think we need to, as much for me is still open”. Robyn had overheard one participant say, “The key thing for me has been that we need to be able to identify our own paradigm and only then can we begin to understand where our students are at ... we then work from there”.

##### **“Walking the tightrope” – Sharon**

Sharon was mentoring Rob, a preservice teacher (PST) who was regarded by his mentor teacher as making satisfactory progress but who was not engaging in any discussion or critical reflection about what he was learning about himself, his students, or the process of learning and teaching. Sharon was concerned that his teaching practice reflected this lack of critical reflection and engagement, along with a lack of awareness about levels of student engagement and progress in the classroom. She attempted to raise this with both Rob and his mentor teacher, but without success. His mentor teacher said he had improved in the way he commenced lessons and Rob was unwilling or unable to engage in any deeper reflection about his progress, saying that things were going okay and he felt he was getting better.

Sharon felt that perhaps the lack of critical reflection she was witnessing may have been considered normal practice and she questioned herself in the mentor role asking “How willing am I to challenge mentor teachers who are happy with PST progress when I can’t see the same evidence of growth?” She wondered how to open up a line of dialogue with a mentor teacher asking “How do we present in someone else’s classroom and ensure that we don’t appear judgmental of them when having discussions about PST progress?” Sharon noted “this is something I’ve experienced as challenging in mentoring and I’m yet to find a fail safe way to deal with this situation”, as she continued to reflect on the challenges of trying to navigate the different stakeholder relationships and foster critical reflection among PSTs in order to improve teaching and student learning.

##### **“Acting as a teacher or being a teacher” – Wendy**

In supervising Nina, a secondary PST on a 10-week professional experience it became apparent to Wendy that Nina was imitating good teaching rather than truly understanding the teaching and learning process. Nina's lesson reflections were shallow and she appeared to make random pedagogical decisions unable to explain their appropriateness. Wendy spent significant time discussing concerns with Nina, asking her to explain her thoughts behind her lesson plans, and outlining what she needed to do to improve. By the end of the 10 weeks Nina had not developed the capacity or skills needed to be a competent teacher despite glimmers of apparent development, and Wendy felt unable to pass her. However, the university claimed this decision should have been made earlier in the teaching block and that it was too late to fail Nina now. Wendy found herself asking: "How could I have taught Nina to critically reflect so that her pedagogical decision-making was meaningful not just imitative? Why is it that after nearly 20 years as professional experience coordinator in teacher education, I am unable to find the key to triggering critical reflection skills in Nina?" She concluded "I feel really frustrated ... and I feel that I have not done my job well in letting Nina get to this point without bringing about the change needed to develop her into a sound teacher. I just can't pass her now".

Robyn's PC questioned her role in facilitating learning for experienced educators. What structures, approaches and preparations must be considered for presentations about reflective practice to have more than a 'surface impact'? Both Sharon and Wendy questioned their professional role, perceiving they 'failed' to enact their role in facilitating PST understanding of the learning process and reflective skills, and in gatekeeping for the profession (Koster, Korthagen, Wubbels & Hoornweg, 1996).

*Author reflection on their pedagogical confrontations*

Examining their own PCs, each author reflects here on the values inherent within and the reasons why they found them confrontational.

*Robyn*

As educators, we need to 'close the loop' on learning and teaching. Too often, learners and teachers can feel frustrated by a lack of closure, and this lack of closure can only be addressed once it has been acknowledged. I speak about being explicit in practice, and the value of 'talking out loud'. Frustration can and will build if too many loops are left open and students/learners don't make the connections with their own experience. As a teacher educator, I now endeavour to ensure that I am more explicit about closing loops and assisting learners to identify and connect in their own ways with concepts, learning from their own experience, not mine. Less is more.

*Sharon*

Mentoring PSTs during placement is a complex and demanding role (Cuenca, 2012; McDonough, 2014, 2015) and Sharon's confrontation highlighted the challenges of different expectations between mentor teachers, PSTs and university staff. In reflecting on her PC, Sharon could see the way her own belief in the value of critical reflection informed her approach to mentoring, but she also became aware of her own tendency to try and find a "fail safe" solution. Part of her learning in examining her PC was a growing awareness that mentoring, like other forms of teaching and learning situations, cannot draw on a formula, but requires an understanding of each situation and the individuals involved. Sharon also identified that developing a relational trust with all members involved in the mentoring relationship is something that is crucial to building the opportunities for meaningful discussions and critical reflection.

*Wendy*

Wendy was willing to expend a lot of extra time in assisting Nina believing everyone capable of critical reflection. She believed it was simply a matter of utilising the time available to unlock Nina's capacity, and that with her own significant experience in teacher education Wendy should have been able to effect the growth needed in Nina. Yet, teaching is a highly complex profession; experienced teacher educator supervision doesn't necessarily mean that all PSTs will develop a mature understanding of the teaching/learning process. Upon reflection, Wendy realised that many

of the strategies she had used to try to help Nina were quite didactic. She noted “I was doing too much telling and not enough letting her discover for herself”. It is possible that Wendy took too much responsibility for Nina’s growth and inadvertently impeded the process. Perhaps if Nina had experienced a critical incident in her own practice it would have triggered the much needed change in Nina’s understanding of teaching (Meijer, de Graaf, & Meirink, 2011). Maybe Nina was incapable (at least at that point) of recognising the complexity of teaching demands and decisions and mentored intervention was not the answer.

For each of the authors the confrontations were important as they contested their beliefs around the way in which they mediated their professional role in their work.

#### *The role of assumptions in pedagogical confrontations*

In our analysis we identified the role of assumptions underpinning these. Referring to the work of Brookfield (1995, 2012) we then engaged in a deeper analysis of each confrontation by identifying and classifying the assumptions as causal, prescriptive or paradigmatic. The analysis of data indicated to us how embedded the assumptions are that structure and “frame the whole way that we look at the world” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 3) and ultimately, the ways in which these deeply held, and often not immediately apparent paradigmatic assumptions impact our daily work as teachers and teacher educators. Paradigmatic assumptions are the most difficult to uncover, and they are only “examined critically ... after a great deal of resistance to doing this, and it takes a considerable amount of contrary evidence and disconfirming experiences to change them” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 11). The analysis of the PCs revealed the identification of firmly held paradigmatic assumptions.

When we initiated this self-study we were seeking to identify the pedagogical confrontations we experience and how they might connect with others’ PCs and the impact on teaching practice. Analysis of the data highlighted we all had role assumptions, in particular paradigmatic assumptions, in both the PCs and our responses to them. This was an unexpected outcome of our self-study research and although we have previously used ‘assumption hunting’ as a lens to examine our practice (McDonough & Brandenburg, 2012), we were surprised by the power of paradigmatic assumptions in our work and practice as teacher educators. In returning to our own PCs, each of us considers the role of assumptions reminding ourselves that “assumptions are rarely right or wrong [sic.], they are best thought of as more or less contextually appropriate” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 15).

#### Robyn

Robyn has reflected on the ways in which her own paradigmatic assumption related to teaching about critical reflective practice with academics from multiple disciplines has been challenged and questions now whether indeed, this skill can be taught. There is an ongoing professional tension relating to improving practice through reflection and working with other professionals to do the same. A key aim is to know more about the complexity and sophistication of what we do as teachers (and other professionals) and how this impacts on learners, regardless of the context.

#### Sharon

In reflecting on her PC, Sharon identifies that she holds a paradigmatic assumption about the value of critical reflection in the teaching and learning process. Sharon’s decision to refrain from challenging the mentor teacher about her professional role in developing critical reflection skills in the PST could now be validated as appropriate given the high-stakes of school placement shortages (i.e. the context), and the challenges of developing trusting relationships in time pressured situations. Sharon also identified a prescriptive assumption in her PC that related to her feeling that she should have been able to identify a “fail safe” response to make the mentoring situation successful and effective, regardless of context. Engaging in the self-study process has enabled Sharon to make explicit the factors that had influenced her PC and her response.

#### Wendy

Wendy’s reflection illuminated that she held two assumptions: one paradigmatic – that with the right guidance PSTs are capable of learning how to critically reflect and develop deep and complex understandings of the teaching and learning process; and one prescriptive – that as an experienced



teacher educator Wendy should have been able to bring about the requisite skills and depth of understanding in Nina. Both of these assumptions led to Wendy's time-consuming emotional and professional investment in trying to develop Nina's immature understandings. Yet, using the tool of PCs, Wendy now realises that her refusal to challenge her beliefs led to a didactic approach in her mentoring rather than giving Nina the opportunity to experiment, self-discover and draw conclusions for herself. It also led to a unnecessarily prolonged process. This PC led Wendy to think about the extent to which mentoring and supervision are able to influence over-simplified or uncomplicated understandings of teaching in PSTs.

### Implications and conclusions

Through our self-study we identified that pedagogical confrontations are informed by the assumptions we hold, are mediated by the contexts in which we operate, and for each of us were related to how we view our professional role as teacher educators and the actions we take in our practice. Through engaging in self-study we have identified the value of PCs as a means to further understand the sophisticated and complex nature of teaching. Each of us has been able to come to a deeper understanding of our own practice and been able to modify it. When embarking on this self-study we sought to generate a collective understanding of PCs however, we now view these as not only as confrontations but rather as a pedagogical invitation to engage in deepening our knowledge of the influence and impact of assumptions on practice. We extended this pedagogical invitation to the self-study community as a means to build on existing research and have generated early findings about common assumptions and PCs. These will be shared in a future publication. We now invite other teacher educators to participate in this dialogue to extend and develop our shared understandings.

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