Chapter 1

Just who do we think we are . . . and how do we know this?

Re-visioning pedagogical spaces for studying our teaching selves

*Claudia Mitchell and Sandra Weber*

---

*Just who do we think we are?*
*Just who do we think we are?*
*Just who do we think we are?*
*Just who do we think we are?*

It should not be surprising that the opening chapter to a book on the ‘how’ of teachers’ autobiography and self-study begins with questions. Repeating the same question but with different emphases offers a sense of a necessary uncertainty in the evolving field of teacher education wherein teachers and teacher educators (like other professionals) are questioning what they are doing and how this questioning might enhance professional practice. In the work over the last two decades or more on reflective practice, action research, teachers’ personal and practical knowledge, teachers’ stories, teachers’ narratives of experience, teachers’ oral histories, collective memory and autobiography in teaching, and, of course, self-study, the focus of this book, the idea of questioning what happens in classrooms from the perspective of teachers and teacher educators, has been central. And while there is a great deal of overlap in the assumptions of these various areas – not the least of which is the valuing of experiential-based knowledge – it is important to acknowledge, too, that each of these areas has resulted in its own set of debates about veracity, quality, ethics, validity and so on, and its own set of questions about ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and, of course, ‘how’ in relation to subjectivity.

How do we ‘study’ self? What does method have to do with it? Increasingly, method is taking centre-stage in research in the social sciences. This book will thus be of interest to a wide range of scholars, graduate students, and practitioners who grapple with issues of method and ‘doing.’ Its unique contribution and appeal lies in the range of methods that are demonstrated (including memory work, fictional practice, life-histories, collaborative autobiography, image-based approaches) and the attention that is given to methodological issues. This edited volume brings together a wide range of
self-studies in teacher education, each of which grapples in a different way with issues of method and methodology, and in so doing addresses some of the gaps in the existing professional literature, where the focus has been more ‘about’ self-study and less about the range of possibilities for ‘doing’ self-study or about determining a critical framework within which to examine self.

The ‘how’ of autobiography and self-study in teacher education highlighted in this book comes out of work from the mid-1990s onward related to the idea of studying the ‘self’ of teaching as a specific activity of teachers focusing on their own teaching practices. This work is reflected in a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (the S-STEP Self-Study in Teacher Education Practice http://www.usd.edu/aber/) and in a biannual conference held at the Castle in Herstmonceux, UK, on teachers’ self-study, and is located within a larger body of research on self-study including the work of Hamilton (1998) and others, a two-volume International Handbook of Self-study of Teaching and Teacher Education (Loughran et al. 2004), and a newly established peer review journal, Studying Teacher Education: Self-study of Teacher Education Practices. Much of the work represented here comes out of a growing awareness of the need to explore a range of visual and arts-based methodologies, something that can also be seen in specific organizational groups such as the American Educational Research Association SIG for Arts-based Educational Research (http://www.usd.edu/aber/) or in local groups of scholars such as the Centre for Arts Informed Research (http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch/airchome3.html), or the Concordia-McGill based Image and Identity Research Collective (www.iirc.mcgill.ca).

**JUST WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?**

In *That’s Funny You Don’t look like a Teacher* (Weber and Mitchell 1995) and *Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers: Beyond Nostalgia* (Mitchell and Weber 1999) we highlight the significance of the political project of teachers and teacher educators taking on our own self-study. When we systematically review films about teachers (*To Sir With Love*, *Mr Holland’s Opus*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) we conclude that too many outsiders – film makers, novelists, politicians – have made it their business to represent teachers and schools, and too rarely have we as teachers as insiders made it our business to ‘write back’ to the colonists of teachers’ experience. Following Ashcroft *et al.*’s early model of postcolonial thinking (2002), we come to this book with a bit of ‘attitude’ which documents our writing back from a position of self-awareness. Indeed, the title *Just Who Do We Think We Are?* is meant to challenge the ways in which we as teacher educators are constantly ‘under fire’ – even, or especially – in our own universities, and the
methodological issues that we are obliged to take on if we are to take seriously our work as teachers and with teachers.

**JUST WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?**

The ‘who’ in Just Who Do We Think We Are? has a great deal to do with the self/selves in teaching, and we are reminded of the provocative installation of glass tunics created by the Canadian artist, Lyse Lemieux. Phantom-like and silent, the glass tunics are almost invisible, as teachers so often are (‘I’m just a teacher’), and as students so often are when they are taken down in the presence of teachers (‘Just where do you think you’re going?’). Yet, grouped together these glass images seem to insist – but on what? Are they standing firm together in muted dignity to attest to their pedagogical convictions . . . to bear witness? Or are they reproaching us through silent protest – hard garments for hard times? Just who are the people who might wear or might have worn those tunics? Why choose the transparency of glass for a tunic, that traditional garment so often associated with school? Are we thus exposed, unable to hide, even from ourselves? Is it the rigidity that matters, or is it the fragility? How do we fashion ourselves? Do we see ourselves through a glass darkly or in light? Can we see through each other? Should self-study make our intentions and our actions transparent, or is it our souls that are reflected? And if so, how? It is questions such as these that underlie much of this book.

**JUST WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?**

We are teachers and teacher educators from Canada, the UK, Australia, the United States and South Africa. Some of us are writing about work in our own university classrooms, while others are writing about our own elementary, secondary or adult education classrooms. Some of this work is with beginning teachers or experienced classroom teachers; others write of teaching and mentoring graduate students working on masters or doctoral dissertations, while still others are reflecting on our experiences in development contexts.

**JUST WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?**

Who we think we are is, of course, related to the question ‘Just how do we study ourselves?’ and comes out of our previous work on methodology, including visual and arts-based approaches to teachers’ self-study through the uses of performance, photography, art installation and video documentary (Weber and Mitchell 2004), methodologies such as photography and memory
work in the study of childhood and popular culture (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002; Mitchell and Weber 1999), dress stories as method (Weber and Mitchell, 2004), participatory arts-based methodologies such as narrative writing, photography and video documentary with youth in the study of gender and HIV/AIDS (Walsh et al. 2002) and particular girl-methods that recognize age and status (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, in press). In posing such questions as ‘what can a teacher do with a camera?’ (Mitchell and Weber 1999), or ‘What if teachers became documentary filmmakers?’ (Mitchell and Weber 1999; Weber and Mitchell 2004) we have been interested in making practical the idea of teachers ‘writing back.’

In editing this book, we recognize that the field of self-study in teaching, so rich in possibilities and yet so potentially fraught because of a lack of understanding of ‘how’ (and by association ‘why’), warrants a specific focus on the methodologies themselves. Many of the doctoral studies with which we, the editors, had been involved at McGill and Concordia Universities since the mid-1990s have at their centre questions of ‘how’, and many of the sessions of the S-STEP of the AERA continue to lead to heated discussions of ‘how’ and ‘who’ and ‘why’. But it is, as well, comments overheard in the hallways of conferences, voiced in small group sessions, or muttered over coffee or beer that have been telling clues as to how people really feel about autobiographic forms of self-study:

‘His work is too touchy feely, too soft.’
‘I don’t have time for the luxury of self-indulgence.’
‘If that’s self-study, I don’t want any part of it!’
‘Work like that can never be rigorous.’
‘That’s not scholarship, it’s voyeurism.’
‘That’s not good scholarship, it’s purely personal.’
‘But this is just anecdotal evidence! How do we know that this is the truth?’
‘How scholarly can it be to just study one’s self?’
‘Sounds like navel-gazing!’

Failing to grasp that looking inward can lead to a more intelligent and useful outward gaze is to seriously misunderstand the method and potential of narrative and autobiographical forms of inquiry. To pick up on the metaphor of navel-gazing, there is nothing about focusing inwards on the individual that necessarily precludes simultaneously pointing outwards and towards the political and social. Although narrative and autobiographical forms of self-study can make valuable contributions to scholarship, this in no way implies that this is the only form of self-study. Perhaps the expression ‘navel-gazing’ is sometimes meant as a criticism arising out of the fear that we too might be expected to follow suit; if some scholars are expected to reflect on the minutiae of their personal lives or to allow their
bodies and emotions a place in their theorizing, others will have to do so, as well.

It is in our everyday language that we are most likely to lay bare our taken-for-granted assumptions, casually or unthinkingly revealing deep differences in the stances and values of our research, and perhaps of ourselves. In something akin to Hargreaves’ (2001) notion of ‘contrived congeniality,’ we prefer to ignore or cover over the paradigmatic cracks that run through the self-study community, preferring to keep quiet so that we can get on with our work. Or, perhaps although we are aware of the many differences, we don’t see these as problematic.

Are legitimate and important epistemological questions and concerns about quality and guidelines being disparaged as navel-gazing exercises? Is the self-indulgence of those particular papers and publications that do not evoke any commonality of experience, that do not resonate in some significant way with their audience, that bore rather than engage, that shut the reader out, that do not stimulate reflection, or that do not point, however obliquely, to broader social and theoretical concerns not being extrapolated to self-study in general?

Minutiae that brilliantly evoke the commonality of human experience in one piece may seem merely irrelevant in others. But these problems are not because the work is ‘purely personal,’ but rather have to do with the quality of the writing, the lack of transparency, or as Feldman (1997) or Mitchell and Weber (1999), or van Manen (1990) might charge, the failure to reflect on and critique broader political or social issues. A good example of this would be in relation to the ways that rural teachers with whom we are working in South Africa are beginning to explore their own personal responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis. A number of the teachers enrolled in an Honours course on Understanding Research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in carrying out research with other teachers on how well they are prepared to deal with HIV/AIDS in their schools and communities, spoke of their own dilemmas in realizing that, as they interviewed their colleagues, they were in fact engaging in their own self-study. Their response conveys a sense of the autobiographical work highlighted in Ann Oakley’s now famous article (1981) on feminist research methodology ‘Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms.’

**HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED**

As a review of the literature on self-study will attest, there are many different ways to address self-study. The accounts in this book by no means represent all the approaches and methodologies available, and in fact, as broad as they are, given the range of authors and locations, they are all approaches that have in common a number of features that may not characterize all forms of
self-study: all fit within a qualitative framework; much of the work falls within the growing body of work on visual and arts-based methodologies and self-study (see also Weber and Mitchell 2004); there is a strong focus on personal subjectivity; and there is a great deal of overlap between methodologies (a point we take up in the final section of this chapter). Contributors all started with the same basic set of questions: How do you go about engaging in studying your own teaching? What was particular about the way that you went about doing self-study? What studies informed your work, and/or served as a kind of methodological foreshadowing? What aspects of your teaching were you involved in studying (or assisting others to study?) What challenges in terms of method did you encounter? Ethical concerns? Acceptability as a legitimate form of study? The unexpected?

The book is organized into four main sections: ‘Self-study through memory and the body’, ‘Self-study through literary and artistic inquiry’, ‘Reflection, life history and self-study’, and finally ‘(Re)positioning the self in and through self-study’. The first section of the book draws together methodologies for self-study that highlight some of the links between memory work and embodiment. Sandra Weber’s work, for example, on the pedagogical possibilities of exploring issues related to clothing and footwear demonstrates how working within the space of memory, material culture and performance has contributed to understanding the roots of her own teaching curriculum. Does the shoe fit, she asks? How does my curriculum make room for the individual differences of my students? Vicki Perselli’s text ‘Heavy fuel: memoire, biography and narrative’ draws attention to the arena within which to contest how we author our own self-studies by exploring the use of fictional memoire. Catherine Derry takes up methodological issues of working with memory and embodiment through the use of drawings. How do beginning teachers look back on bullying and peer rejection and how might the materiality of the drawings themselves provide an entry point to understanding ourselves now?

The six chapters that make up ‘Self-study through literary and artistic inquiry’ are all located within an emerging body of scholarship on arts-based methododlogies and self-study. Max Biddulph, for example, explores the uses of mural making in examining his identity as an out gay teacher. Mary Lynn Hamilton takes the teacher out of the classroom and into artistic representations of teachers, students and schools in the art gallery by exploring the works of American artist Homer Winslow. Linda Szabad-Smyth follows up the theme of teachers and the artistic by exploring what she calls the ‘artful’ and ‘artless’ experiences of teachers. In so doing she highlights how the generalist elementary teachers in her study describe the art in their own homes and how their choices relate to how they see themselves as teachers of art. The chapters by Diamond and van Halen-Faber, Butler-Kisber, and Kelly each have a poetic or literary dimension to them. Diamond and van Halen-Faber, for example, describe their work with visual metaphors and
butik as an art form with beginning teachers. Butler-Kisber demonstrates the way in which working with her own memories of schooling through poetry contributes now to understanding her work in supervising masters and doctoral studies. Tony Kelly writes about literary anthropology and the ways that a selection of novels all set in Nova Scotia might become central to the pedagogy of change for Nova Scotia teachers working with rural youth.

The selections in Part 3, ‘Reflection, life history and self-study’, all deal with issues of reflexivity and collaboration in one way or another. Two of these chapters (LaBoskey and Berry and Loughran) provide orientations to the significance of systematic reflection based on work with beginning teachers in the US and Australia, and these are followed by chapters that offer accounts that draw on a range of contexts: Linda Lang, for example, writes from the position of a teacher educator working in drama education; Katharine Childs describes her work with young people in an adult education program who themselves embrace the notion of self-study and reflection. The Pathlamp Project portrayed by Carol Mullen and William Kealy describes a partnership model for teacher researchers.

In the last section, ‘(Re)positioning the self in and through self-study’, there is a deliberate questioning of the self within social, cultural and geographic contexts. Mary Phillips Manke engages in a series of reflections as a lesbian administrator and teacher educator about her sense of self and how she positions herself in the academy and within the work of the self-study community more specifically. Anastasia Kamanos Gamelin, while drawing on doctoral work in a Canadian context related to the position of the woman academic as artist in the academy, now finds herself teaching in a women’s university in Saudi Arabia where she explores the notion of journey as quest. Finally, Kathleen Pithouse, Teresa Strong-Wilson and Jackie Kirk all write of white (and Western) privilege and the ways that this has taken them into a particular self-study. For Pithouse, it is the experience of being a white teacher working in a post-apartheid South Africa with adolescents in a teen writing project; for Strong-Wilson, it is the experience of being a white female teacher working in a first nations school in Canada, and in so doing she draws on the women travel writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ironically, the book ends with a selection called ‘Starting with the self’. In this selection, Jackie Kirk, a white woman writing of her work with women teachers in Pakistan and other development contexts, suggests the ways in which methodologies of reflexivity and feminist inquiry allow our work to go beyond our own classrooms and even beyond our own social and cultural contexts in our efforts to transform schooling globally.

AN ALTERNATE ORDER . . .

Clearly, there is a great deal of overlap between and amongst the chapters. While we have more or less grouped them according to specific methodological
areas, there are some alternative groupings of these chapters that might be equally useful. For readers interested in the uses of literary memoir, it would be helpful to look at the ways that the writings of Perselli, Strong-Wilson, and Kamanos Gamelin, taken together, highlight this particular genre within autobiography and self-study. In extending this division as one on teachers and writing is Butler-Kisber’s chapter on poetic inquiry. Visual approaches to self-study include Biddulph’s use of murals, Diamond and van Halen-Faber’s exploration of arts-based metaphors of teaching through batik and other visual forms, Hamilton’s discussion on the pedagogy of the art gallery, Szabad-Smyth’s exploration of teachers of artwork, Weber’s work on clothing and the body, and Derry’s chapter on the use of drawings. For those wishing to look specifically at how classroom teachers (as opposed to teacher educators) have used self-study methodologies in day-to-day teaching, one might look to the work of Childs and Pithouse, each of whom writes from a specific classroom context. The work of Biddulph, Phillips Manke, Derry and Kirk all highlight sex and gender which, given the increased emphasis on body and identity in teacher education, could constitute its own section, and within a further division of this, Biddulph and Phillips Manke write as gay teacher educators in a queer space. Finally, for those interested in the study of teachers, in relation to issues of geography and class, in particular, the chapters by Kelly and Derry provide a focus on rural teaching in the Canadian Maritimes.

AND A NEW ORDER IN SELF-STUDY . . .

These new groupings suggest that the study of ‘who we are’ and ‘how we know it’ as teachers has many dimensions to it. Clearly, the area of self-study and autobiography in teacher education is rich methodologically, conceptually and pedagogically. Each one of the new groupings, as with those we have already chosen, could be expanded into a whole book in and of itself. At the same time, as we note in a previous section, there are critical areas of methodology and self-study that remain to be explored. These areas range from concerns of ethical acceptability, confidentiality and anonymity, to addressing sensitive and critical issues such as the self-study of teacher educators and teachers in Southern Africa in relation to HIV/AIDS, to the need to expand the repertoire of possibilities for addressing class and culture; to the possibilities for sex and body to become more central to the project of self-study; and finally to the ways in which the study of self/elves can become more central to (and documented within) institutional change and transformation. Indeed, that’s what we want our work to do and that’s who we think we are!
REFERENCES


