

## ***1.18 Essay Review of Hamilton, M. L. (1998) Reconceptualising Teaching Practice***

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This worthy book sets out to offer an understanding of "the promise of self-study" and the chapters illustrate the scope of the work encompassing self-study from philosophy to methodology. The idea arose from a conference held in Herstmonceaux, East Sussex held jointly by the Canadian Queen's University and the Self-study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group (S-STEP SIG) of the American Educational Research Association. In the preface, Barnes stresses the importance of establishing ground rules of self-study as he reviews the concluding remarks of the conference. The concept of self-study includes being a responsible and reflective teacher but as Barnes finds, there is a wide range of interpretation. Fundamentally there are two categories of self-study. First it can be a reflective investigation of one's own practice, often highly informal. Second, self-study can be a formal process of investigation and once this second version of self-study becomes public knowledge it is subject to the micro-politics of academic status and power and the question of validity becomes all important. Usefully Barnes reminds his readers about the five purposes of self-study

- 1 To uncover the real story of what is going on in the course
- 2 To exert political power upon those who control the conditions under which teaching takes place.
- 3 To construct new knowledge (traditional research).
- 4 To enhance the self-knowledge of the participants.
- 5 To celebrate the achievements of a course.

Given these five purposes one has a tool with which to analyze the effectiveness of this book - does this work give fundamental and valid insights into the process, content and rationale for self-study? In my opinion it does.

The Introduction usefully focus on those qualities which many consider to be intrinsic to a commitment to self-study: openness, collaboration and reframing. These three categories provide a framework for the many insightful contributions to this book. I like Tom Russell's observation that "the field of self-study is new enough that there are no experts" - how refreshing and at the same time how welcoming - a field that is new and unsullied by ivory towers and their distant inhabitants. I found Russell's analysis of the nature of self-study and the Knowledge and Understanding gained particularly helpful and reminded me of my own realization that case study research is less a methodology than an approach to research. Perhaps greater attention needs to be paid to the need for self-confidence. Russell talks in almost abstract terms about the need for this but in my experience and I suspect in the experience of many others engaged in self-study this is the crucial factor that determines if self-study starts.

In Howard Smith's chapter the incident that he relates about a colleague encountering the "almost totally crippling paralysis about being deconstructed and not being put back together" intrigued me. Does self-study entail not only analysis of constituent parts but a danger of neglecting a process of re-construction? It certainly suggest that the context for undertaking self-study is important and that in self-study one is likely to be vulnerable. There are relatively few occasions when we allow such intimacy in communicating our intentions to those who do not know us well and thus the feeling of vulnerability is all the more intense.

Smith explores several factors which apparently influenced the self-study recounted in Chapter Two. The driving force of one individual, the use of a particular form of communication to disseminate information - in this case e-mail. Certainly these are useful observations - it would be interesting to see how traditionally book-bound research might be affected by its mode of

transmission. Already much research is made available via the Internet (see Jack Whitehead's site <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw>). Similarly it is important to know something of the personality and motivation of a researcher if we are to gain a true impression of the research. Where Part One of this book relates to Philosophical Perspectives, Part 2 seeks to define methodological perspectives. "Self-study" so Stefinee Pinnegar claims, "is methodologically unique" since "researchers who embrace self-study present an alternative representation of the relationship between the researcher and the researched" to that of modernist objectivity. The difference so it seems between self-study and other approaches to research is that the self student is required to present "in voices in addition to their own, believable evidence of changes in practice or claims of understanding in meaning." It seems to me that a self-study approach requires a new shared language - do I, for example, when claiming that something has "meaning" share your understanding what "meaning" is? Surely a predisposition to facilitate communication between self-study researcher and the intended audience is an essential pre requisite that could have received greater attention from the writers in this section of the book.

I enjoyed Janet Richards' self-portraits and as an opportunity for teachers to identify classroom behaviours such as too much "teacher talk" that are not congruent with their students' growth. This form of visualization no doubt has much to offer pre-service teacher-educators by way of calling attention to teachers' actions and decisions that are particularly exemplary and beneficial. There is an approachability and spontaneity that emerges in the pen portraits that could usefully form the basis for discussion and subsequent action. Most of all I like the opportunity offered for those creating the portraits to put them selves in the position of their student audience.

Chapter 4 by Deborah Tidwell and Melissa Heston provides a useful insight into how one might develop one's own or another person's ability to be critically reflective. By using practical argument tutors are enabled to consider their own perspective on their practice but also, through video-taping, to step outside themselves and consider their practice with the aid of a supervisor from the perspective of another person. The practical argument that the authors' refer to entails self-evaluation in writing and oral presentation following videotape review. Perhaps the greatest benefit to be gained from the process set out in this chapter is the opportunity for diagnostic assessment - which can inform and direct the future work of tutors with their students much as classroom teachers can plan lessons more effectively when assessment of their pupils' work is taken into account. I found the idea of diverting students' attention away from areas of study that they find stressful (Maths, Science) towards some aspect of the "real world" a useful strategy - again the language used here is all-important.

Part 3 of the book provides three well-chosen Case studies of Individual self-study. Chapter 8 by Nancy Hutchinson starts with a comment from the author "I wonder how long I have been staring out of the window without seeing anything." As a teacher educator of pre-service students the challenge implicit in this sentence reminds me that I can see without insight and that self-study is goal orientated. Seeing is not enough - the self-study must inform and inspire. I found the detail in this chapter at times detracted from my train of thought and though context setting is important it should not dominate a study. However, the honesty and openness of the section relating to "Sometimes I'm not thinking, I'm just teaching" gives me a timely jolt about occasions when the brain seems to be as it were "on hold" - and these are the occasions when I am pleased to park my car in the garage after remembering all too little of the long drive home!

Part 4 relates Case Studies of collaborative self-study and Vicki Kubler LaBoskey rightly points out, "there are distinct differences between collaborative research and collaborative self-study." In the latter, researchers work collaboratively to improve their practice - something that can only be attained through openness and reframing. In the competitive atmosphere of academia where one person's success seems sometimes to be gained at the expense of another's collaborative self-study is to be welcomed in the celebration and valuing of another's practice it can entail.