

# Building the Boat, Growing the Tree

## Exploring the Development of Self-study Analytic Methods

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Metaphor

Narrative

Retrospective Analysis

Haiku

Literary Arts-based Methods

*The purpose of this retrospective self-study was to investigate why and how my analytic methods in self-study have developed and transformed over time (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017; Tidwell & Edwards, 2020). With a support of a critical friend, I aimed to identify how the development of data analytic methods enhanced my understanding of my professional learning experiences, through these two questions: How did the data analysis methods in my self-study research develop over time? and, How does this development inform the transformation of my practice? My first attempt at analysis (self-study #1) focused solely on the narrative data and coding. My next two self-studies (self-study #2, and #3) were analyzed through metaphor. My fourth self-study used Haiku to analyze the narrative data, examining my teaching of Japanese students. Based on our retrospective analysis, we observed the following: the more experiences I gained professionally, the more complex my data analysis became in making sense of my professional learning, and arts-based methods expanded the boundary of my analyses. Crafting Haiku served as a culturally respectful way to represent my professional learning.*

### Introduction

*Standing at the thresholds of every door of my new experience, I used to just open them and entered inside without hesitation. I was never afraid of a change. In another word, I was naïve. However, when I opened the door of early childhood education in Iceland, I stumbled at the threshold. I hit my head hard. I didn't know how to stand up again until I encountered self-study. (Meg's journal, 01/08/2022)*

I (Meg) am a Japanese doctoral student and preschool educator in Iceland. The first visible threshold of my professional life experience was when the education-related cultural differences between Japan and Iceland confused me in my first year of working at an Icelandic preschool in October 2014. It initiated my self-study of practice as my doctoral project.

Exploring what was happening in my professional life, I began with a traditional data analysis method of coding the narrative of my reflective journal. Narrative has always been a part of my data, but it took me some time to understand that I needed creativity and inventiveness in my research process for making a better meaning of my own practice in a different cultural context (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020; Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020). I realized that a simple

analytic method did not express my deeper understanding of my professional learning experiences to accommodate my “so what?” in my practices. Thus, I began to use more creative methods to illuminate a characteristic of each study with different methods. However, my “so what” had to be investigated to capture a whole picture of my self-study to go beyond my personal challenge (Zeichner, 2007). I was curious about exploring why and how my methods had to be evolved (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015).

To begin my investigation, I asked Deb to become my critical friend in the summer of 2021. Deb often includes arts-based or other unique methods. She has also explored the transformation of her own self-study over time (Tidwell & Edwards, 2020). I believed that she would give me great inspiration through collaborative dialogue. Her participation in my inquiry motivated me to put my focus on the methodological aspects of my four self-studies and to explore why and how my self-study methods developed. In this study, the first person *I* refers to Meg, and *we* refer to Meg’s and Deb’s mutual understanding through collaborative analysis.

The purpose of this retrospective self-study was to investigate why and how my analytic methods in self-study have developed and transformed over time (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017; Tidwell & Edwards, 2020). I aimed to identify how the development of data analytic methods enhanced my understanding of my professional learning experiences, through these two questions: *How did the data analysis methods in my self-study research develop over time?* and, *How does this development inform the transformation of my practice?*

### **Context of the study**

As a Japanese immigrant educator working in the Icelandic education system, my self-study opportunities have been diverse. Since my current full-time position is as an early childhood educator at an Icelandic preschool, my main self-study focuses on my practice there. However, my cultural hybridity between Japan and Iceland began to influence my research interest. As a part of my doctoral studies in Iceland, I started an international research collaboration with teacher educators and student teachers who study inclusive education at Moshiriya Teachers’ Training College (pseudonym) in Japan. I visited their college in 2016 and 2019. Teaching Japanese student teachers has been a new experience for me. Self-study helped me bridge different teaching fields to make sense of my practice as a hybrid educator between Japan and Iceland.

From 2014 through 2021, I have been involved in various self-studies of my practice. For this study, I choose four major self-studies which were shared publicly through presentation or publication. My data analytic methods transformed over time to keep exploring my “so what” in practice. The first self-study incorporated coding narratives. In my second and third self-studies, I included metaphors in my methods as a literary arts-based approach. The fourth self-study employed Haiku as my pedagogical approach and for data analysis. While looking at all these self-study research experiences as the focus of my doctoral dissertation, I began to wonder about the transformation of my methods to more arts-based forms.

### **Literature Review**

As there is no one correct answer to self-study (Loughran, 2004), the methodological strategy should not be limited. It has been a natural phenomenon for me that my self-study methods keep transforming “by taking them into a new context and using them in ways that often depart from the traditional” (Tidwell et al., 2009, p. xiii). Arts-based methods, especially literary arts such as metaphors and poems enabled me to present education-related stories to uncover hidden meanings from data (Samaras, 2011).

Metaphors are always around us, and we naturally use them to express our thoughts and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Lakoff and Johnson described metaphors as conceptual in nature, where “metaphors we use determine a great deal about how we live our lives” (p. 244). When metaphors emerge from education-related life stories, they capture the essence of teaching which provides a new look at practice (Bullough, 1994; East, 2009). These metaphors could be powerfully incorporated into narrative stories and give an impact on other researchers. Dyson (2007) explained that the power of metaphor “bring(s) new things into consciousness leading to initially unperceived understandings and knowledge,” arguing metaphors bring us as humans to a new stage of “consciousness and perception as the various parts of a journey story unravel, are investigated and pondered” (p. 41).

When researchers use metaphors, they try to shed light on invisible or intangible feelings they experience (East, 2009; Knowles, 1994). Metaphors support researchers to verbalize their experiences. For example, a novice teacher expressed her feeling of vulnerability with a rolling coaster ride metaphor (Knowles, 1994). East (2009) explored the transformation of her metaphors in eight years of her practice. Her metaphors enabled her to capture the development of her practice and a way of thinking. For novice teachers, teaching could be unstable, it is always having highs and lows. Using metaphors enables novice teachers to stand at the threshold to reflect on their own practice, to develop a better understanding of their teaching experiences (Nishida, 2021).

Similar to metaphors, poems allow us to explore our hidden emotions and develop our professional knowledge. Pithouse-Morgan (2021) combined vignettes, poetry, and dialogue for the purpose of inquiring about her professional learning moments. She discovered the benefits of using poems for professional learning. Samaras (2011) argued that Japanese Haiku summarizes our thoughts in a poetic manner. For me as a Japanese native, Haiku is a culturally responsive method to express my thoughts and experiences in my mother tongue (Nishida, 2022). Beginning in Japanese elementary school, Haiku has often been integrated into my life not only as a part of the school curriculum but also to inspire me to frame my inner voice through 5-7-5 syllables. Samaras (2011) emphasized that Haiku is a way for researchers “to be concise, parsimonious, and articulate in a very short space” (p. 122). Haiku enabled me to discover the power of poetry. Therefore, using Haiku in my fourth self-study made sense to me culturally and experientially.

### **Methods**

While reflecting on my four self-studies during my doctoral studies between 2014 to 2021, I had various questions. I needed to use different strategies to answer my questions. It seemed to be a natural procedure for me to employ respective methods to answer every “so what”.

Retrospective analysis (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017) was necessary when comparing present and past data to investigate the development of my analytic methods. According to Dalmau and Guðjónsdóttir, a retrospective self-study uses existing data that have been collected over time. I used narrative across all four self-studies that were first developed as short stories based on journaling. My first attempt at analysis (self-study #1) focused solely on the narrative data and coding, but it provided a fundamental source to initiate other self-studies related to my practice at the Icelandic preschool. My next two self-studies (self-study #2, and #3) were analyzed through metaphor. Self-study #3 was inspired by self-study #2’s metaphoric story, but it has developed into a visual metaphor. My fourth self-study (self-study #4) employed Haiku as my post-metaphor literary arts-based method. Haiku took multiple roles in self-study #4 as my culturally responsive pedagogical approach to teaching Japanese students, analyzing the narrative data, and examining my teaching.

Initially, narrative stories were written to underpin the meanings of metaphors and Haiku. Creating a matrix of data from the first four studies, I began the retrospective analysis by using the previous data/results. Deb kept asking me provocative questions to help me explore my uncovered intention of why my methods to answer my questions transformed over time. Deb’s inquiry also clarified the trustworthiness of the study through developing our dialogue (Samaras, 2011). Our collaborative analysis enabled us (myself and my critical friend) to see an initial level in the development of my analytic method into a poetic form of a “way of knowing” (Edge & Olan, 2021, p. 3). We then engaged in a more in-depth analysis of my self-studies by examining (through reading and rereading, discussion, and shared meaning-making) the short stories, the metaphors, and the Haiku to better understand my development of methods used over time.

### **Outcomes**

Based on our retrospective analysis, we observed how my analytic methods developed over time in these four self-studies. The more experiences I gained professionally, the more complex my data analysis became in making sense of my professional learning. In this section, a metaphor of threshold bridges my exploration of the transformation of analytic methods. All proper nouns are pseudonyms.

### **Self-study #1 (2015): Coding Data**

My Japanese teaching habit of controlling children hindered my practice at an Icelandic preschool. Icelandic early childhood education respects children's freedom in play. I knew it in theory but could not deliver my theoretical understanding in my practice. In October 2014, I experienced a professional identity crisis. It was as though I stumbled at the threshold of the new door of my professional challenge. I encountered the self-study methodology through my doctoral supervisor. However, entering the inside of the self-study world was not smooth. My research experience has been limited to my master's project by using traditional qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant observation. Without knowing what to do, I was stuck at the threshold. My data focus became my continuous post-teaching writing in my teaching journal.

A year later, I began editing stories from my journal. My analytic method focused on a color-coding process of my journal between 2014 to 2015. At the beginning of my professional identity crisis, I wrote in my journal about my reflection on the importance of respecting my Japanese cultural resources. After writing ten short stories reflecting each of the ten themes that emerged from my data coding, I found the core theme to be Japanese cultural resources. These ten short stories became valuable data sources for further self-studies of my practice. Yet, the short stories seemed insufficient in capturing the complexity of my professional experiences. I did not see a clear connection between my short stories and the more complex dynamics within my practice. I needed a different method beyond narratives to express the complex meaning of my work and thoughts. I spent a few more years crossing the threshold to enter the self-study world.

### **Self-study #2 (2018-2019): Finding metaphor**

My ten short stories helped me identify what was happening, but I wanted to capture a more in-depth meaning of my practice. Around that time, I was struggling with my self-contradiction while teaching a university course. I encouraged students' creativity, using arts-based assignments, but I felt helpless and inadequate when it came to assessing them. The AERA conference in 2018 was my first major threshold into the self-study world. Many unique self-study methods were presented. The most significant learning from listening to other self-studies was that I also should become creative to answer my "so what" questions. I knew that my resources could be key to improving my practice, but I was still stuck at the threshold. I was not sure how I could be creative. Using my cultural resources, I began to seek alternative ways to explicate my professional learning.

A few weeks after my second participation in AERA in 2019, I was at Moshiriya College in Japan for my second research visit. I often walked along the river which is connected to the Pacific Ocean. Local fishermen docked their small boats by the riverbank. My walk there reminded me of the view of the sea from my preschool in Iceland. Something sparked. When I became aware of the common geographical and cultural resources between Japan and Iceland, an inspiration of using metaphors in my self-study emerged. I discovered that I was the sailor of the boat, and my boat was built with my resources. I learned that metaphors enabled me to think about and to reflect better on my understanding of my professional learning. The power of metaphors struck me. Through this metaphoric perspective, I was able to open a new door, and jumped over the threshold to go inside my unfamiliar form of analysis.

### **Self-study #3 (2020): Visual Metaphor**

Having realized the power of metaphors, I continued to explore my meaning-making process through metaphors. Creating narrative stories with metaphors enabled me to express my professional learning experiences. I was excited about my new strategy. I used metaphors as a key to open the door to discovering a new meaning of my practice at an Icelandic preschool, but the complexity of my self-studies has challenged me. My view has become more inclusive of different experiences outside of my working context.

When I needed to explain my comprehension of self-study as a doctoral project to the public, I was stuck at a new threshold. Until then, I simply enjoyed my self-studies with metaphors, but my attention was not on the connection across all four as a holistic piece; I was not making connections across the different methods in my self-studies. This created a new threshold and I seemed stuck at the door; I could not enter.

Walking daily in Iceland is my opportunity to reflect on my practice. Things I see during the walk prompt my reflection. One autumn afternoon, during a walk a metaphoric image of a tree sparked my connections between the visual representation of a tree and my practice. At home, I drew a doodle of the tree to begin with while thinking about the children at my preschool. They never criticize the quality of my drawing. Their criticism raises when I am not responsive to their interest. While I draw pictures with children, I ask children what they can imagine in the picture. In the end, there is a story we create collaboratively. Those stories may not make any sense to adults, but for children, the process of creating a story together is important. Like my story drawing with children, the meaning within the tree drawing was what became important. Prompted by the tree picture, my reflection was going deeper and deeper. I kept adding small details and stories to my drawing. Notes were also taken at the same time.

In the tree picture, the roots represent concepts, and they are hidden under the soil of theory. Tree branches are small self-studies with different methods. Fruits are my new findings and knowledge. Sometimes fruits may be too sour to eat, but birds of critical friends are always willing to examine the taste of the tree fruits and show their support in waiting until fruits get ripe enough to share with everyone.

The story of my self-study tree has developed through my discussion with critical friends who would help me develop my reflection. In my journal in November 2020, I wrote “my self-study is organic as a tree...It (self-study) will be passed down to posterity.” My imagination of the self-study tree kept growing to represent my doctoral project about the self-study of my becoming a hybrid educator. I learned that the tree drawing as a visual metaphor made my reflection visible to discover my learning and challenges.

#### **Self-study #4 (2021): Haiku**

Since I opened the door of the world of using literary arts in my self-study, my confidence in creativity grew much more. Without stumbling, I began crossing thresholds to enter the world of new methodological experiences. The influence of my encounter with creative methods began to be visible in my practice, but it took me some years to acknowledge its influence on my self-study.

During my research visit to Moshiriya College in 2019, I was asked to teach self-study to Japanese student teachers. My concern was how I could introduce self-study in a 90-minute workshop. In my first teaching experience there in 2016, my Icelandic active learning approach intimidated student teachers who were not familiar with student-centered (rather than teacher-directed) teaching. While I was trying to introduce a new approach for their learning, I realized I had not included respect for their teacher-directed learning culture. From this experience, I knew that my teaching in Japan, especially introducing self-study, had to be carefully planned. Considering our cultural resources, I decided to use Japanese Haiku for my teaching about critical reflection to motivate Japanese students’ first step toward their self-study experience.

Haiku’s role was diverse in my teaching. Reflecting on my teaching later, I realized that Haiku could also be my strategy for expressing and analyzing my learning. As Japanese, Haiku is a great cultural resource that we take for granted. Using Haiku in my teaching and research allowed me to stand at the threshold to explore my practice as a hybrid educator. Once I crossed the threshold, there was a hidden door of poetic inquiry. By creating my own Haiku to reflect my professional learning, my understanding of the importance of culturally responsive teaching has grown.

### **Discussion**

Through our retrospective analysis, I realized that the improvement of my practice over time bridges my four self-studies. As the methods used within my self-studies changes, so did my pedagogical approaches. But it is not a cause-effect dynamic. The give-and-take between my change in method and my change in pedagogy seemed to influence each other. This method- and pedagogy-change dynamic reflected my growth as a self-study researcher over time. In this section, I explore each self-study in depth to make better meanings with my critical friend of the connection between the transformation of my methods and my pedagogy.

Between self-study #1 and #2, I needed three years to move forward. I read self-study literature and early childhood theories, but they did not ring a bell for me. I felt my practice at preschool was getting better, but the focus seemed to

be more on taking care of the children rather than improving my actual teaching practice. I felt like I was spending my days trying to get by. Upon retrospective analysis, I began to see that this time with the children in the classroom was necessary for me to accumulate experiences, and to get a sense of the dynamics of the children and the preschool classroom. I was struggling, but journaling kept me motivated as I collected my thoughts and experiences. One of the accumulations over time was the image of the sea.

Until the view of the boat and sea sparked my imagination, I did not appreciate the value of metaphor as a method, as I used metaphors often in my thinking and talking (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Nishida, 2021). My hybrid cultural resources between Japan and Iceland allowed me to make a connection and empowered me to become more creative in my teaching at an Icelandic preschool. When I experienced the power of metaphor through writing, my teaching at preschool became more responsive to children's interests rather than pushing them with my own teacher-centered plan. I came to realize my approach may have ignored children's daily input and growth. Finding myself struggling in my teaching, I learned how to stop at the threshold with my own agency by writing a story. I put my struggles in metaphors and tried to analyze what was happening around me and how to solve them. My new habit of understanding my practice through metaphors opened a new door to the visual metaphor in my self-study #3.

Before I came across the idea of a visual metaphor to express my thinking and understanding, I was still looking at my self-studies as different pieces of my work, such as my self-study #1 and #2. My self-study #3 does not seem to be directly connected to my practice, but my experience in drawing with children for storytelling enabled me to use visuals as metaphors in my own research. The visual metaphor of the tree enabled me to tell a story of my practice. I began by labeling part of the tree as representative of aspects of my teaching practice and self-study research. The individual elements within the tree became a larger visual of the complexity of my practice. This visual lent itself to the development of a story of practice reflecting the nature and relationship of those elements to my professional work. I feel the Icelandic children set me free from my old self. Working with them in a preschool setting helped me transform my pedagogy and my self-study methods of research.

My use of Haiku was my challenge to the post-metaphoric literary arts-based method of poetic inquiry to my students and myself. Through my teaching with Japanese students, I learned that students could become more critical to their own learning if they could take a familiar approach such as Haiku. I found the culturally responsive nature of Haiku not only helped me teach and understand Japanese students' learning about critical reflection but also to better express my understanding of my practice in a new teaching context outside of Iceland. I re-discovered that mutual respect is the ultimate keyword of my teaching.

### **Conclusion**

As Hamilton and Pinnegar (2015) assert that a good self-study "evolves, reforms, and resharpens as the study progresses" (p. 187), my self-study methods keep evolving. Arts-based methods expanded the boundary of my analyses. Through short stories, the complexity of my experiences and thoughts became visible as metaphors (East, 2009; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Metaphors provided a forum to expand my thinking to visual metaphors that provided a rich context for thinking about the complexity of my practice. The visual metaphor allowed me to connect across my self-studies in thinking about and visually representing my practice. As the fourth self-study, it provided a broader examination of my practice that enabled me to think more deeply about how elements of my work are connected and how I engage with those elements. My evolving use of methods across my self-studies addressed the Zeichner Paradox (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015) calling for the need for self-study to show the expansion of personally gained knowledge to the larger research community. Through my interest in expanding my knowledge about practice, and my curiosity in exploring different methods in self-study, my change of methods over time showed my development of flexibility, creativity, and collaboration (with critical friends). This is not just a change in my thinking about my practice over time, but rather this is a change in my process for study. This process requires a thoughtful selection of method choices. It is the willingness to be flexible and creative in that thoughtful approach that allows the research design to evolve and change to better answer evolving research questions. This can be in the overall method used, the data choice, and/or the analysis process used with that data. This study proposes that other self-study researchers be thoughtfully creative in their data analytic methods to help further their understanding of their professional learning experiences.



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