

Uncovering Care in My Pedagogy and Collaborative Self-Study

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Collaborative Self-study

Critical Friend

Pedagogy of Care (POC)

Vulnerability

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I embarked on collaborative self-study with a colleague as a critical friend. Together we scrutinised my pedagogy in a pre-service teacher course during the rapid transition to online education. Inquiry revealed the centrality of care in all dimensions of my teaching: course design, content, and relationships. This chapter looks behind the scenes of that study, focusing on the contribution of our dialogical collaboration. Journal entries and emails demonstrate how care, prominent in my teaching, permeated ongoing conversations with my critical friend. That respectful, nourishing research partnership and my pedagogy of care were mutually supportive, both requiring honesty and involving vulnerability. Our dialogue enabled me to grow, enhancing the learning experience I gave my students during a traumatic period. Empowering self-study led to immediate changes in my practice and helped me overcome challenges like stress, loneliness and self-doubt during the pandemic. Similarly, growing awareness of my relational pedagogy enabled me to appreciate and maximise the benefit of our research partnership. I recommend that educators providing care for students consider engaging in collaborative self-study. These reciprocal relational processes, aiming for transformation and continual development, can nurture each other and be particularly powerful in times of crisis or change.

Context of the Study

COVID-19 triggered rapid change in educational practice. Social distancing limited face-to-face instruction, and like other teacher educators in Israel and beyond, I was coerced into digital spaces. I was technologically competent but had never taught a course online. During the initial confusion, Susie, a colleague, suggested we coact to research my online pedagogy. We didn't know each other well, so the offer was surprising, flattering, and alarming. I worried that I had not researched independently since my PhD, a narrative practitioner inquiry, very different from the research I assumed my colleague was visualising. Considering her an accomplished researcher, I was drawn to the possibility of collaboration but troubled by self-doubt. Overcoming insecurity, I seized the opportunity to research during the pandemic.

This chapter looks behind the scenes of a qualitative collaborative self-study conceptualised by two teacher educators at an Israeli college of education during COVID-19. That study focused on teaching in my yearlong didactics course for pre-service teachers studying English Language and Literature and a teaching certificate. After teaching the course face-to-face, I designed and taught Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) online. My colleague and I researched the intricacy of TEYL and how I enacted pedagogy of care (POC). The chapter explores how my critical friend and I demonstrated mutual care in self-study while I struggled to provide compassionate teaching, a pedagogy of care, for my students.

Self-Study

Self-study is recognised as professional learning for teacher educators (Loughran, 2014). A respected and rigorous methodology (Brandenburg & McDonough, 2019), self-study, was recommended during the pandemic by Berry and Kitchen (2020) "for documenting the experiences and insights that come from radical change" (p. 123). Self-study enables teacher educators to evaluate how their educational assumptions and values suit their practice (Buttler, 2020). It scrutinises the local and specific while allowing readers to reflect on their own contexts (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Attracted by the intertwining of teaching and research, we aligned our inquiry to the five elements LaBoskey outlines (2004); "...self-initiated and focused... improvement-aimed... interactive... includes multiple, mainly qualitative, methods... defines validity as a validation process based in trustworthiness" (p. 817). Choosing self-study during the pandemic enabled us to examine my teaching critically, learn from the experience and make real-time changes to my pedagogy for the immediate benefit of my students. Furthermore, our research relationship provided ongoing support.

Critical Friends

Self-study requires collaboration (Samaras, 2010), usually with a critical friend (Schuck & Russell, 2005), facilitating questioning, dialogue and the search for additional perspectives. Significant collaboration enables researchers to achieve more together than either could alone (van der Walt & Meskin, 2020). Both parties must feel comfortable to enable productive discussion (McEntyre et al., 2022).

My critical friend and I were situated in the same educational context and embarked on the research with shared objectives. Despite the resemblance, we were positioned in the study in different roles. Based on the "Critical Friend Definition Continuum" (Petroelje Stolle et al., 2018, p. 23), Susie was located in the middle of several criteria – she wasn't a "close friend", but certainly not "a stranger", she was positioned somewhere between "an insider" and "an outsider" in the study, between "fully involved" and "loosely involved", and her role was between "reciprocal in nature" and "one way". Our divergent perspectives led to fruitful discussions and various pedagogical and methodological understandings. Petroelje Stolle et al. (2018) argue that researchers often mention critical friendship without explicitly describing the collaboration; this chapter unpacks our research relationship.

Vulnerability

Self-study involves publicly accepting vulnerability as researchers honestly share their practice (Cuenca, 2020). Self-study researchers discuss vulnerability as challenging but necessary in their inquiry (Rawlinson, 2020). Kelchtermans (2009) argues that generating educational knowledge requires engagement with different viewpoints, procedures and "discomforting experiences... in which... one's personal interpretative framework is thoroughly challenged" (p. 270).

In the early stages of this research, working with a critical friend accentuated my sense of uncomfortable vulnerability. As the collaboration developed, I embraced vulnerability as a powerful trigger for reflection and learning.

Pedagogy of Care

Conceptualisations of education (Noddings, 2005) and teacher education (Kitchen, 2010) based on respect and compassion have been discussed. Shoffner and Webb (2023) conclude that there is no all-embracing definition of care in education. Still, it is widely accepted that it involves "relational interaction of carer and cared-for" (Shoffner & Webb, 2023, p. 3). Kitchen (2005) adopts the term "relational" to describe a supportive, empathic and respectful teacher-learning environment.

The complexity of online pedagogical care is gaining interest (Rabin, 2021). Online POC involves more than building caring relationships with students (Burke et al., 2022; Morris & Stommel, 2017). Our research presents an elaborate model of POC in online teacher education, illustrating how POC can be embedded in all elements: synchronous and asynchronous learning and educator-student communication.

Aim

In this chapter, writing alone, I discuss collaborative self-study and POC as mutually supportive practices in intertwining research and relational teaching. Following others who link self-study with critical friends and POC (e.g. Moorhouse &

Tiet, 2021); I explore how dialogic interactions with my critical friend supported me while I struggled to provide care for my online students in a period of rapid change. Similarly, I demonstrate how growing awareness of my relational pedagogy enabled me to understand and maximise the benefit of my research partnership.

The question driving my critical inquiry is: How does intentionally intertwining collaborative self-study and POC enhance my practice as a relational teacher educator researcher?

Method

Coming from different research backgrounds, our decision to adopt a qualitative self-study methodology was not trivial.

I kept returning to the kind of research that excites me... We talked about practitioner inquiry..., which may... transform our online teaching and improve learning for our present and future students... I threw the idea to her... to my surprise, I heard excitement...

Susie came with a tool kit of quantitative knowledge and linguistic experience... I didn't know how to talk about classroom discourse in... statistics and graphs... We began unpacking terms - motivation, engagement, online learning, and... sharing our ambitions about looking closely at classroom practice. (September 24, 2020¹¹)

I had practitioner inquiry experience, but my critical friend was unfamiliar with qualitative research or self-study. Through collegial dialogue, Susie became enthusiastic and adopted the role of a critical friend. We began collaborative self-study surrounding TEYL during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Ethics

We predicted that receiving authorisation from the college's ethics committee to research my teaching would be challenging. Sometimes I felt inclined to concede when Susie and others suggested researching a colleague's practice. Explaining my insistence to Susie clarified and strengthened my determination to perform research embedded in my educational practice.

"Because I am an ethical educator and have respectful relationships with students based on listening and respect, I desire to do this. I'm interested in honest dialogue with my students to improve my teaching..." (September 30, 2020).

I grappled with the significance of ethical research in my professional context, protecting the well-being of my students. Susie agreed, but the struggle with the ethics committee was taxing. Methodological flexibility and creativity helped us design the inquiry in ways that received approval. We were invariably committed to ethical conduct towards our participants, each other and ourselves as researchers and the data generated (Brandenburg & McDonough, 2019).

Participants

From the outset, the thirty-six TEYL students knew I was researching my teaching with Susie, who taught them another class. As TEYL educator, I was also a research participant.

Susie and I met weekly via Zoom throughout the academic year and the following year. Meetings lasted approximately two hours. Gradually our dialogue became closer and more personal; meetings became more focused and productive as we clarified our aims and methodology. We compared understandings, brainstormed, explored assumptions, and planned. Collaborative data analysis provided continual opportunities to contemplate how teaching and learning were compatible with "our evolving ideals and theoretical perspectives" (LaBoskey, 2004, p.820) and explore the "living contradictions" (LaBoskey, 2004, p.829) evident in my work.

Data and Trustworthiness

Data in the study included lesson video recordings, emails, student interviews, and my reflective journal written during TEYL and the inquiry. I did not write journal entries in a set format or at regular intervals; instead, when I needed to

document teaching or research ideas, grapple with dilemmas or jot down my experiences. This chapter is mainly based on my journal.

Methodological quandaries surrounding our collaboration arose in data collection, including who should conduct the interviews. There were three options, me (the teacher educator), Susie (their lecturer in another course), or us both. There were advantages and disadvantages to all three options. We worried that two lecturers might be overwhelming. We thought the interview might be more honest if Susie asked about my teaching, but we understood that interviews could connect the educator and students in self-study. We discussed the issue, read methodological literature, and reached out to accomplished self-study researchers for advice. Finally, we decided that I would interview alone as a teacher-researcher inquiring into her work using self-study based on trust and relationships. Additional dilemmas appeared later, including unexpected student remarks about Susie and other colleagues.

We strived to achieve trustworthiness in this inquiry in several ways. We collected multiple data forms and engaged with them alone and together to make meaning from them. Through detailed writing over two years, I maintained continual researcher reflection (Lennie, 2006). Similarly, ongoing critical researcher dialogue (Samaras, 2010) and collaboration (Riley, 2012) throughout the course and following year contributed to our researcher's integrity and study trustworthiness (Hamilton et al., 2020). Sharing my vulnerability in my journal and conversations was crucial in developing credibility.

Outcomes

Unpacking Care

As we gradually uncovered my POC in TEYL, the framework suggested by Burke and Larmar (2021) helped me recognise many of the caring characteristics of my teaching prominent in our research relationship. Elements associated with the first two principles outlined in the framework, modelling and dialogue, were significant in our interactions.

POC – Modelling Care Through Intentionally Person-Centred Online Interaction (Burke & Larmar, 2021)

I observed three elements of this principle in our interactions: mutual respect, a friendly environment and commitment to collaboration and ongoing learning (Burke & Larmar, 2021). Susie and I based our collegial relationship on mutual respect. We valued and discussed our differences in background, fields of expertise, pedagogy, methodologies, and work preferences. Early in our collaboration, I reflected, "Susie is a linguist... I need to be aware of her capabilities, to allow her to look at the data through her eyes, just as I will... through mine" (December 21, 2020). We were highly devoted to working together for mutual benefit and passionate about our learning. A year into our collaboration I wrote: "I didn't embark on this research for a pat on the back; I'm not interested in valour stories.... I joined Susie... to learn, improve my teaching and share critical pedagogical understandings with my colleagues..." (September 20, 2021). Our informal, friendly, and sincere communication contained affectionate greetings, amiable comments, and information.

POC – Exercising Immediacy and Responsiveness (Burke & Larmar, 2021)

Burke and Larmar (2021) argue that responding to students promptly and supportively is central to POC. Throughout TEYL, my commitment to student success and well-being appeared in my correspondence.

When snowed under, it is difficult to ask for help, but it can change the whole picture... This is an essential understanding for you as students and will be even more critical when employed as teachers. I'm here if you want to think about this together. (Email, May 28, 2021)

I identified that many of the messages I conveyed to students, like that above, were equally relevant to the relationship I was developing with my critical friend. Many conversations centred on our workloads and the importance of sharing our challenges. I recognised that supportive comments I wrote to students were often similar to those Susie and I expressed to each other. "I'm sorry to hear that life has been so difficult lately... Remember that... it's just a matter of working through... You can do it! If you would like help... please say so..." (Email to student, May 20, 2021). The caring, relational focus that was obvious in my pedagogy was also paramount in my research alliance.

POC – Dialogical Orientation (Burke and Larmar, 2021)

Burke and Larmar (2021) elaborate on two elements of dialogical orientation in POC: appreciation of multiple perspectives and open-ended dialogue. After identifying these in my pedagogy, I pinpointed them in my ongoing conversation with Susie.

In my writings, I value our differences. At the outset, I was wary of Susie's research background but later recognised its contribution. "Susie has an analytical, quantitative, linguistic background. She isn't looking for the narrative and dialogue I'm looking for... We will approach the same data with different lenses... hopefully uncovering understandings that neither of us... could have discovered alone" (December 21, 2020). I acknowledged that working together was generating research richer than either of us could have produced on our own.

We needed to set ground rules early for honest open-ended dialogue to eventuate. I repeatedly asked open-ended questions and requested Susie's genuine opinion. I pointed to my pedagogical shortcomings to show I expected to discuss the negatives in my practice. "I asked Susie if she sees things not working well. She brushed it off, saying that she didn't imagine there would be any. I guess there will be lots..." (December 21, 2020). Initially, Susie may have hesitated before mentioning problems as we didn't know each other well enough, or she may have been overly optimistic.

Knowing TEYL was proceeding well, I was wary of self-glorification, only identifying positive aspects of my teaching. I recognised that our desired transformation was in my practice's problems and dilemmas. During early analysis, I wrote, "I don't want her to say everything is fine if she sees elements... needing improvement... This learning... requires humility, putting ourselves at risk. If I don't move beyond... 'Your lessons are great....' I'll miss the transformational opportunity I'm seeking" (January 3, 2021). I constantly reminded myself of the importance of open-ended critical scrutiny of my work.

POC – Respectful Communication; Modelling and Expecting a Culture of Respect and Mutual Care (Burke & Larmar, 2021)

For many educator-researchers, pressure, and self-doubt are constant. I wrote comments like, "Thirty years teaching have not soothed the nerves; I still can't begin a course without doubting my ability... worrying that the seeds of motivation and curiosity won't germinate" (October 22, 2020). I felt comfortable voicing them with Susie; her responses helped balance my perspective. Awkward situations require deliberation and shared awareness of mutual respect. When students mentioned Susie's course in interviews, I debated my response.

Some of her teaching techniques were given as instruction examples, connecting students and allowing them to focus and learn. Other comments pointed to the difficulty some students faced... Would those comments have been made if Susie had been interviewing with me? How will she react...? There is much learning here for us as a team, but I can't help feeling a little uneasy. (September 20, 2021)

I needed to be as sensitively open and honest with my critical friend as she was with me.

Identifying Vulnerability

Findings reveal a high degree of vulnerability in my teaching and research. The close, caring relationship I developed with my critical friend supported me as I navigated new pedagogical challenges, enabling me to grow and learn.

I found the close critical viewing of my lessons painfully uncomfortable. I wrote, "...this is something different, up close, raw, exposing" (February 14, 2021). The word "cringe" appears several times in my reflections, emphasising my uneasiness. "Watching my Zoom lesson wasn't easy... I felt vulnerable and could feel myself cringing at remarks I made and how I sounded and looked... Looking straight into the mirror is never easy, especially alongside others" (January 3, 2021). Six weeks later, I remained unaccustomed to this vulnerability.

I cringe as I sit face-to-face with myself and watch and listen. My physical presence on the screen, my hair and skin, up close is unsettling... I see myself as others see me.

Beyond the physical image, my behaviour, language and reactions are open to close scrutiny. 'Why did I say that? 'Why did it take me so long to answer?'; 'Why did I laugh like that?'... (February 14, 2021)

Our meetings helped me process this vulnerability and see the exposure in context. "Once a week, I glance at myself as an educator and researcher through her eyes... a kind of debriefing session... I return to seeing the videos as they are, snapshots in an educational web I've created" (February 14, 2021).

After a year with an honest collaborator, I felt more comfortable opening up to her and becoming more honest with myself. I grappled with contradictions in my pedagogical assumptions. For example, "What surprised me most was the length of my monologues. That wasn't something I expected... While I feel the students are engaged... and 'with me', the long transcripts of my speech, rarely interrupted by others, startle me" (February 14, 2021).

Those reflections led to additional conversations and immediate changes in my practice. Openly sharing vulnerability and expressing care and support allowed us to learn from those delicate circumstances. Data analysis showed how I discovered my learning was similar to messages I had previously written to students.

I understand that seeing yourselves on video... can be unsettling. In this age of distance learning... teachers need to jump this hurdle. Speaking English in front of your peers is worrying for some, but that is also something you need to master before you enter the classroom. (Email, November 11, 2020)

Growing awareness of vulnerability enabled me to generate new understandings connecting my practice and research.

Sustainability: Learning to Take Care of Myself

My critical friend scrutinised my teaching, but she cared for me and worried about my well-being. Uncovering my POC, Susie noticed strong links between my demands of myself and the care I enacted for students. She pointed out my passion for teaching and my enthusiasm for preparing students to be successful, caring educators. Identifying a severe problem in my practice, Susie's reactions and unerring questions made me aware of the personal and professional price I was paying for caring in the ways I was. "I refuse to compromise lesson quality and focus on tiny details... I'm a role model... This requires maintaining my enthusiasm and creativity while I, like my peers, feel pressured and severely overworked" (November 6, 2021). Susie's questioning led me to dwell on questions of sustainability. "My insistence on intensive communication... and my pedantic concentration on... variety... the endless hours spent doing "urgent" tasks... My students and I all paid the price... I neglected reflection and my learning... because of the exaggerated workload... (July 20, 2021). Words like "insistence", "pedantic", "endless", "neglected", and "exaggerated" reveal my growing impatience surrounding my practice.

Susie noticed and questioned time-consuming expressions of care in TEYL. This sharpened my awareness of sustainability issues and forced me to reconsider my practice. "Am I feeding students with a teaspoon when I send a reminder email with uncompleted tasks? Is this feasible? Would I do this... in a regular academic year?" (January 8, 2021).

Eventually, Susie confronted me with a complex question: "How can educators create caring learning environments in balanced, healthy, and sane ways? How can it be doable?" I then dared to express new understandings about my often-excessive devotion to my work and neglect of self-care. I conceded, "I am a workaholic and a pedagogical perfectionist; for the first time, I am admitting it" (September 27, 2021). In self-study, there is "always more to ponder and possibilities to explore" (Hamilton et al., 2020, p. 313). I continue searching for an adequate response to Susie's question; it is crucial for my well-being.

Discussion

Self-study and practice are intricately interwoven (Vanassche & Berry, 2020). This study accentuates the affinity between pedagogical care and collaborative self-study (see Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021; Rabin, 2021). Self-study, like POC, is directed towards transformation and constant professional growth (Pithouse-Morgan, 2022); both are grounded in dialogue involving vulnerability. This chapter explores and demonstrates how the two relational processes are mutually supportive.

Examination of my teaching, alone and with my critical friend, and scrutinising my practice through the theoretical lens of POC enabled me to notice the familiar in new ways (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Sharing my assumptions led me to grapple with awkward questions about my practice and reach new understandings of online pedagogy.

Collaborative self-study allowed me to observe my practice with a supportive critical friend, but the process was unsettling. I "decisively embraced vulnerability" (Petroelje Stolle et al., 2018, p. 150), exposing my practice while negotiating new pedagogical terrain. Weekly meetings and collaborative analysis of my teaching required me to be candid, acknowledging my triumphs and deficiencies (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2018). This vulnerability is ingrained in self-study (Berry & Russell, 2016).

Martin (2020) proposes that we "must not only consider how we enact care towards our students but also the ways that we engage in processes of care for ourselves, particularly during difficult pedagogical moments" (p. 15). Providing care in my teaching heightened my awareness of the mutual care I shared with Susie and its contribution to the study, my professional learning, and my well-being. Engaging in interpretive inquiry close-up, personal and sensitive, strengthened our relationship, enabling us to support one another throughout the pandemic.

Limitations and Recommendations

Unfortunately, we did not record our meetings, overlooking potentially rich data. I will undoubtedly document future conversations.

Despite our decision to explore my teaching, I regret a lack of reciprocity. Teaching and researching TEYL was so demanding that we did not look sufficiently at Susie's work to meet her unique professional needs.

I strongly recommend that teacher educators interested in learning from and improving their pedagogy engage in self-study with critical friends. These collaborations can be particularly beneficial and powerful in times of crisis or rapid change. Joining the call for institutional support for POC educators (Burke et al., 2022), we advocate the institutional provision of time and encouragement for collaborative self-study. Caring research relationships can motivate and help fill the significant emotional needs of educators caring for students. This inquiry shows how collaborative self-study can provide this necessary care and enable teacher educators to combat loneliness and self-doubt.

We contacted established researchers in the self-study community during the inquiry about methodological dilemmas. Grateful to receive respectful, constructive responses, we recommend others dare to reach out this way.

A grant from Oranim College of Education, Tivon, Israel provided financial support for this study.

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^[1] All quotations are from my teaching and research journal unless otherwise stated.





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