

Enacting ethical frameworks in self-study: Dancing on the line between student agency and institutional demands

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Sound ethical standards are important in all research, though ethical issues and challenges differ among disciplines and fields of study. Self-study researchers engage in their research in the context of their everyday work as educators. This dual position can generate opportunities for them to draw on their fields of research while trying out their understanding by acting upon and experimenting with responsive educational practices within their contexts (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007). The dynamic existing between self-study research and professional practice is such that ethicality is always embedded in the processes of both self-study and professional practice (Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2012; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2010; LaBoskey, 2004). Teaching is a profession that could or should be considered a moral practice, not just a collection of skills and techniques (Carr, 2000; Palmer, 1997). Researchers must engage critically and ethically with their research and educational practices, lest they develop educational practices that are unfair and undemocratic (Biesta, 2007, 2010; Carr, 2000). In this sense ethical dimensions are always a fundamental part of the self-study process.

In self-study ethical considerations become more than a set of procedural conditions to follow. Ethical self-study is about adopting an ethical orientation, a stance toward educational and research practices that provide opportunities to improve the development of democratic and transformational education (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Mockler, 2013). In developing an inquiry stance, practitioners adopt the belief that part of their work is to participate in educational and social change. This involves a continual process of questioning the ways in which knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated and used (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Adopting a stance of inquiry that foregrounds ethicality requires self-study researchers to develop enough awareness to recognize and deal with ethical tensions and dilemmas experienced within their contexts (Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2010, 2012). This process of exploring ethical tensions calls for participants to be both honest and willing to face their own strengths and weaknesses. If we are to improve our practice, these tensions need to be explicitly articulated and

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addressed—meaning that we as researchers can sometimes find ourselves in a vulnerable position (Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2012).

In this paper we observe that research ethics and pedagogical ethics infuse each other and influence the development of our learning community of master's students conducting their final thesis. Our identification of ethical dilemmas is guided by our mission as teacher educators to empower students as agents of change. We develop a stance of inquiry to create a safe space for students where they can explore the underlying reasons for their educational practices and beliefs. This allows them, as professionals, not only to figure out “how to get things done,” but to carefully consider and be able to justify what is getting done, why they are getting it done, and whose interests are being served (Carr, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Palmer, 1997). In creating such a space for students, we need to be alert to subtle feelings of tension in our supervision and explore their underlying causes.

In order for educators to make changes in their behavior, they need to explore its underlying sources, including how their mission as educators influences their professional identities, and what behavior and competences they develop to carry out their work within different environments (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010). In using core reflection to analyze and find solutions to the ethical dilemmas we encountered, we created opportunities to reflect on different layers and understandings of selected moments.

We, the authors, have been inquiring into our collaborative teaching for more than five years. We have gathered data from 2012-2017 on our collaborative supervision of a group of master's students. In our work, we have aimed to empower our students as professionals in education within the frames of our institution and according to our professional working theories (Guðjónsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Gísladóttir, 2017; Jónsdóttir, Gísladóttir & Guðjónsdóttir, 2015). Working on the issue of ethics, we tackle questions such as: Whose needs are we serving—our students', our own, our institution's, our society's—and how are we serving them? And how do we balance being critical and at the same time respectful and constructive? In this paper, we will focus on one illustrative case we encountered, as it exemplifies a recurring theme in our supervision.

Why and how

The purpose of this paper is to uncover and display the ethical frame we adhere to as we perform a self-study of our educational practice. The aim of the research is to gain a clearer understanding of the ethical challenges we have encountered in our self-study educational practices. We seek an answer to the question: What kind of ethical challenges have we encountered in our self-study on collaborative supervision of master's students in teacher education, and how have we responded to them?

The data come from collaborative research we have conducted over the last five years. They consist of: recordings of our planning and analytical meetings, notes from supervisors' meetings, e-mail communication among us supervisors, and e-mails to and from students, TOCs (ticket out of class), communication in a Facebook group for our master's students, and finally our journal entries containing our reflections and thoughts about our teaching and collaboration. One type of e-mail communication we have gathered is the Monday letter, a weekly e-mail, students send us supervisors to tell us what they did during the week, what they plan on doing in the coming week, describe challenges or victories, or ask us questions if they need our help. In order to ensure anonymity of our student in the case we use, we do not use dates in citing our data.

Analysis has been ongoing, as we have used our findings along the way to adjust our teaching and ways of working. Over the years we have analysed and presented findings from our self-study of our collaboration (Guðjónsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Gísladóttir, 2017; Jónsdóttir, Gísladóttir & Guðjónsdóttir, 2015). We have identified recurring issues and themes that we have responded to. For this paper, we scanned through the bulk of our data, revisited recurring themes and selected incidents and cases where we have faced ethical dilemmas or reflections, and used them to analyze and choose from, one case to present in this paper. We selected a single case from the initial pool of incidents to analyze further in this article as it was an example of a theme that

has emerged year after year. We used the case to extract the ethical component and to see how self-study methodology both influenced our understanding and reactions to it, while at the same time raising new ethical considerations. We discussed the incidents and the case we chose and the incidents related to it, in analytical meetings in person and on-line. Core reflection helped us to collaboratively dig to the center of our personal and professional identities to identify our ethical guidance in practice (Guðjónsdóttir, Jónsdóttir & Gísladóttir, 2017). The process required us to look closely and honestly at the incidents. To analyze the case we present here, we used the Praxis Inquiry Protocol (Guðjónsdóttir et al., 2007). Thus we *describe* the case from our praxis, *explain* what happened, and *analyze* and *theorize* to see how the ethics that guide us influenced our responses (*practice changed*) and helped us resolve tensions.

Identifying the interplay of ethics in supervision and self-study

We have encountered various ethical issues in our collaborative work. One of the reoccurring issues in our work is finding ways to support students in terms of making decisions of their content, working processes and the form of their final products. The case we choose to focus on highlights the challenges of supporting the master's students in their experience of the empowerment of academic knowledge, and how responding to them allows us to create spaces for their professional development. Students often find the theoretical demands of writing a master's thesis to be an overwhelming task, something they have to endure and come to terms with. Most students want to gain practical knowledge and learn methods and tricks to teaching rather than battling the distant theories we supervisors feed them. We continuously speculate what makes our mission (theoretical) more important than theirs (practical). Our experience as teachers taught us that if we take the time to grapple with these grand theories to understand our practice we are not only able to respond to challenges as they arise but to work towards changing their underlying causes. Thus, we find it important to integrate these views in our supervision. Starting by creating space for students to tackle their ideas in a dialogue with us. In that process we negotiate how they can approach their ideas and discover how theory provides different perspectives on understanding their issue and educational practice.

One of the students we supervised, Anna, was an enthusiastic and resourceful teacher. In her master's project she created a set of wonderful teaching materials with several ideas and instructions for use in practice. However, making connections to theories and describing how they made a strong case for her teaching materials was a challenge for her. Svanborg began as her supervisor and Hafdís as the specialist. Initially, Anna had intended to only write the teaching material as her master's project without attending to any theoretical foundation. However, masters' thesis requires students to demonstrate a theoretical understanding of their projects. We discussed Anna's challenges at a meeting and came to decisions that seemed constructive for this student and for us as supervisors:

- If Anna is to meet the demands of a master's thesis she has to do the theoretical chapter.
- We discussed and agreed to be two supervisors in her case instead of one supervisor and one specialist as we can have more supportive conversations with each other that help us give Anna the support she needs.
- We discussed that in order for her to get a useful understanding of the gains the theoretical funds had to offer we would have to take a step-by-step approach advising her as she wrote the theoretical chapter.

(Notes from supervisors' meeting)

In our work we have been developing collaborative supervision. By making the decision to become two supervisors instead of one supervisor and a specialist in students' projects, we believed we would manage to develop a deeper insight into students' thinking processes. In return, we would be better prepared to foster authentic dialogue with students regarding their experiences, needs and preferences of conducting their master's thesis. Following the meeting we

asked Anna to send us each theoretical sub-chapter as she wrote them. We responded carefully, instructing and correcting but always trying to get her to respond rather than giving her the answers, though sometimes we did. From our experience students welcome when we give them concrete suggestions. We see that in the way they either directly include our comments without questioning them or thank us for the feedback. They are more challenged when they receive open ended responses they need to work through. That can be seen in the way they respond either by saying that they do not understand our suggestions or they postpone working through the feedback. This creates an ethical tension for us, as the core of our mission is to empower students through dealing with and discovering the power of theories. This can be seen in our reflection as we discussed our feedback to Anna:

As we have discussed before I am struggling with not making direct instructions or too detailed comments. But I find it difficult to overlook obvious faults I notice and not correct them. However, I try to make the comments I do, in a positive tone, as questions and suggestions rather than directives. But I have to admit that sometimes I just make direct instructions. I do want her to feel empowered through this process. I feel like I am dancing on the line between giving her agency and taking over the power in the name of our institutional requirements and demands. (E-mail communication from Svanborg to Hafdís and Karen)

The next time we responded to Anna, Hafdís wondered whether we allowed enough agency for her to respond on her own terms.

I am wondering if we are beginning to do too much for the student. Instead of telling her what to do or rewrite the sentences, can we ask her questions? Ask her about the focus of the paragraph? What she is trying to tell the reader? What is the main information she wants the readers to take with them? (Notes from supervisors' meeting)

The communication above illuminates how we constantly needed to remind each other not to intervene into the student's writing process with our words and understandings, but rather to give her the space to develop her understanding of what she was doing. Because we were both sharing the responsibility and supervising collaboratively we could articulate our challenges in this supervision which again supported us in dancing on the line of creating a framework supporting students' progress but still encouraging their agency in carrying out the work. Throughout the process from writing the research proposal, gathering data and writing up the findings, Anna repeatedly expressed her own insecurity with writing the thesis. Late September (finishing thesis late December) she wrote to us in her weekly Monday letter:

I have been reading a lot about how to write academic texts, I'm very insecure in my writing. I have found someone to read over my theses when it is ready. It has always been my weakness in school to write essays, I'm told I write too much colloquial text but I think I'm getting better at it.

Anna managed to finish her thesis on time and when she presented her work in the required open seminar she was proud and convincing, showing the audience that she was a specialist in her work.

Reflecting on this process with Anna and our experiences with other students going through similar challenges over these five years, Hafdís pondered:

I feel like we are always trying to get ourselves used to ask questions rather than to tell students explicitly how to do their writing. And we do support each other in doing so. (Hafdís, journal 2017)

In our supervision we are always dancing on this line between student agency and institutional demands.

By supervising collaboratively and doing self-study we were systematically keeping record of our communication in relation to our work. This has helped us to devise ways to explore ways to support our students without going too far in giving them the answers or omitting the institutional standards. Thus the ethics of our own mission to empower students has come to terms with the ethics of our obligation to support students to fulfill the requirements of the masters' studies. They are however still terms we constantly have to negotiate and we do so through our collaboration and self-study.

Engaging with one ethical dimension always brings forth further issues that needs exploration. Ethically, telling the story of Anna could also be considered problematic, as we might be revealing the academic standing of a student and making ourselves as supervisors vulnerable as we honestly acknowledge our challenges. In responding to this dilemma, we take care to leave out any information that could identify this student. As self-study researchers, however, we have to take on the ethical responsibility of sharing our work in order to transform what we do for the benefit of students' learning. In telling these stories, our findings will have the opportunity to influence the master's program at our university, and other supervisors can learn from our work.

Envisioning inquiry as ethical stance

Conducting self-study on our practice raises new ethical dilemmas for us to negotiate. At the same time we find it important to draw on theory in our educational practices (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007) we do not think that the role of teacher education should be about moving theory *into* practice or making sure that practice is research-based (Biesta, 2007; 2010). It is more problematic than that. It is more about the reciprocal relationship between theory and praxis, how these terms are constructed, by whom, and for what purpose. Lytle (2013) reminds us that the interplay between theory and praxis is about constructing and re-constructing knowledge and practice within local context and in relation to what we think we know and what actions we take. By articulating and working through the case with Anna, using self-study as a stance of inquiry helped us excavate the underlying causes of the ethical dilemma in the process of students' learning, while simultaneously finding ways to work through it. In so doing we generated opportunities to try out our understanding by responding deliberately according to the needs we analysed in our practice and within our context (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007). This process has influenced both our pedagogy—what kinds of approaches become available for us to apply—and the learning community we were developing.

By looking at the whole of our data we identified the dilemma of dancing on the line between preserving students' agency while meeting the institutional demands as a common theme in our supervision, emerging in different degrees. The experience of looking at and analyzing one case helped us to understand how we were infusing research ethics in our everyday practice (Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2012; Mockler, 2013) in designing pathways we could draw on to constructively respond to students individually and collectively without eclipsing their agency. In exploring our data we have also realized that our educational practice and self-study have merged and developed into our collective pedagogy of our supervision. The constructive dynamic between doing self-study research and practice requires the ethical lens (Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2012; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2010; LaBoskey, 2004) to problematize and understand our practice and choose our responses. In approaching our work in this way we constantly challenge what we do, how we do it and why. In telling stories emerging from our data, we share that teaching is not just a technical matter; the practice of teaching is ethical and interwoven into the complexity of professional development. The ethicality of self-study demands that we face the ethical issues, analyze and respond to them. Although we acknowledge the importance of responding to or resolving tensions and challenges we also recognize the value in keeping the tensions alive and understand the drive they can provide to keep on developing towards our missions.

Using core reflection in our self-study allows us to identify ethical tensions we experience in our work and reflect on how they relate to the professionals we are or want to become.

Self-study forced us to critically examine how we engage with our students. Anna's case could have been addressed and forgotten as a technical operation in the process of supervising but by focusing on it we problematized it as an ethical issue, as teaching is a moral practice (Carr, 2000; Palmer, 1997). Core reflection helped us to systematically work through this process and develop opportunities for us to open our hearts and minds (Korthagen, 2013) towards students' challenges. This systematic work and openness to students, created a space for engaging in the dilemma in a meaningful way. Through our collaboration in our teaching and self-study, we have identified, analyzed, and grown as professionals by responding to ethical challenges such as the one we have described. In our research we have held up the mirror for each other and our collaboration in supervising masters' students in order to reflect on and understand how we work on finding a balance between being critical on one hand and on the other respectful and constructive. The balance is ever changing and shaky and we keep dancing on the line.

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