

Snap or Point and Click?

Realizing the Potential of a Teacher Education Self-Study

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Abstract—This research work-in-progress centers on the views of participants in a higher education self-study as they compare the web-centric self-study environment with the opportunities and challenges of the traditional written self-study format. Participants include approximately 100 faculty; preservice teachers; district school board personnel; and the reviewers. Through this process, we seek to identify their perceptions of most productive use of professionals' time in a self-study process. The research methodology is mixed and involves the use of a survey mechanism within the web-enabled self-study environment. Several key questions focus participants' attention on the levels of their awareness of the mission, vision and higher education program outcomes. Participants also compare the helpfulness of the written self-study and the web-enabled self-study for purposes of continuous improvement of the overall student learning experience, and engagement. This study is underway and anticipates initial findings by March, 2011 to be presented at the conference.

Keywords - education, digital technologies, self-study, preservice education, technology affordances, new literacies.

I. INTRODUCTION

The context for this study is the self-study of a teacher education program at a designated University of Technology, with a laptop-enabled program. All teacher candidates in the one-year post baccalaureate program are assigned a laptop imaged with educational curriculum policy documents and educational software. Technology is almost ubiquitous in the program: WebCT is the learning management system (LMS), Adobe Connect is used for teaching some of the live, synchronous classes, and teacher candidates learn a wide range of technology-supported teaching and learning methodologies. Some of these include: the construction and deconstruction of digital media; the application, construction and critical analysis of web-based learning objects

(WBLO's); and the educational applications and potential of graphic design programs, blogs, wikis, and other similar learning platforms.

A self-study of the teacher education program is required every 5 years by the government regulatory board for teacher certification, and the university's regulatory board for planned quality assurance review. Both boards require the teacher education program to provide evidence to demonstrate compliance with established standards by providing written analytical self-study documents. Although the teacher education program is technology-centric, this descriptor does not necessarily apply to the accrediting agencies. The licensing board, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) requires a somewhat traditional lengthy narrative (in the area of five or more heavy binders) while the higher education board requires a somewhat more concise 100 page analytical written report. This, for us represents the "snap" aspect of the review. Once the binders snap shut, the self-study is sent to the reviewers.

Both accrediting agencies require the submission of the self-study document to the external reviewers several months before the site visits of the external review teams; site visits include both interviews with stakeholders the reviewers identify and the establishment of an evidence room. For the self-study that is the focus of this research, the faculty of education is experiencing both external reviews in one semester. A lengthy narrative for the self-study has been provided to both agencies but both have

allowed the use of a virtual evidence room for the site visits.

While it is generally acknowledged that the purpose of a self-study is for improvement, research on self-studies identifies that improvement and faculty engagement are not necessarily generated through the traditional form of an externally-mandated self-study mechanism within an external review (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010). To date, little research has been undertaken on a potential further source of association or disassociation for a faculty - that of requiring the accreditation self-study reporting through a written narrative script that is no longer the central communication norm in a technology-centric university. This study focuses on the participant perceptions of gains or affordances from the traditional self-study narrative (the *snap* of the binder) compared to participant perceptions of the gains from a *point and click* web-enabled self-study environment.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Self-evaluation or a self-study in the context of an external review is a mechanism that is intended to engage a faculty in the examination of itself in order to demonstrate that the faculty merits recertification. Whether or not improvement is an outcome of the self-study depends on many factors such as whether or not the study actually reflects the demonstrated outcomes of the faculty's efforts (veracity); whether or not the evidence is valid (trustworthiness of the data); if the external reviewers have the requisite expertise and context to suggest relevant improvements (helpfulness); or whether or not the faculty actually engage in the self-improvement aspect of the self-study (engagement).

There is a field of research on self-study in education. There are, for example, findings regarding the most effective mechanisms for sufficient faculty engagement for an effective self-study (Kollenberg, 2003). Other research identifies tensions in the self-study research field such as disagreement as to what constitutes valid research in a self-study (e.g., Craig, 2009). Another tension surrounds whether or not the

most productive self-studies have an external focus and control, or an internal focus and control (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010). In addition to the tensions identified, we sought studies that address the potential of "new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) to improve the self-study experience and we find little evidence of work in this field. In the section that follows, we will briefly touch upon identified self-study tensions and then introduce "new literacies" as a potentially promising theoretical framework to investigate the efficacy of the self-study as a mechanism for improvement.

The field for self-study research concerns itself with several distinct fields of interest. One is the practical side of self-study - mechanisms for gathering self-study data and faculty engagement, meeting timelines, organizing for the site visit, reporting mechanisms to survive the ordeal, and inviting faculty engagement (e.g., Van Kollenburg, 2003). A second aspect of self-study research concerns itself with identification - wrestling with distinctions between self-study and action research (e.g., Samaras & Freese, 2009) or self-study and teacher-as-researcher (e.g., Turner, 2010). Another tension is around the definition of what constitutes robustness or acceptable evidence in self-studies. Craig (2009) reminds us that "signs of struggle abound" in the field of self-study, which she identifies as a struggle to accept the trustworthiness of reports from the field of practice and reflection, noting that "the hegemony of the dominant research paradigm" brings into question the validity of "self-study research contributions" (p.21) as a relatively new field of study.

A further tension in the research appears to focus around the helpfulness of the study. For example, is an externally-regulated self-study more likely to engage a faculty in self-improvement than a study that is internally-generated? Are self-studies a legitimate means of assuring quality in tertiary education? Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2010) remind us that it is critically important for a self-study to involve and engage the participants or it may result in

something that resembles a window-dressing exercise or one that could potentially decrease the motivation of the participants in their work efforts. Their extensive two-year study identifies that, in most European countries, self-study in accreditation is compulsory and designed for accountability – in Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden, self-study is also compulsory but is designed for self-improvement. The methods are somewhat similar in both processes: a self-evaluation followed by a peer review. Their findings indicate that while accreditation is not a key focus of faculty in general, there are factors that can influence their support of the process. They are more willing to contribute to a process if they see that it has an added value for their organization (i.e., out of loyalty) or if the process has value for their key interests (their students and their disciplines). They are also more likely to contribute if the focus is not control and if the processes are simple and supported by the management. They are also more likely to contribute if an internal quality assurance mechanism already exists. Van Kemenade and Hardjono conclude that professionals will be careful in writing down the truth and showing their vulnerability in an accreditation system that is compulsory and has serious consequences. There appear to be benefits to a system that is not compulsory, invites participation, is less formal, and occurs frequently (e.g., annually).

There is some interest in the literature in how digital technologies can support the self-study process. Askins (2003) identifies some of the advantages of the use of a learning management system (LMS), in this case, Blackboard, for a self-study. These include: the fluid nature of documents; ease of holding synchronous online meetings despite distance between participants and weather conditions; ease of collecting files through a digital drop box system; virtual access to faculty policies and procedures; and ease of managing requests for information to faculty through email. Challenges with an LMS-enabled self-study process include; a need for technical support person; faculty

resistance to technology; and faculty comfort with the LMS (Askins, 2003). She sees the potential that a web-enabled environment holds for supporting a self-study, but finds that a web-enabled environment may not be needed in smaller self-studies.

There appears to be a gap in teacher education self-study research to address issues that are of central importance to us in our study, that is, *matching the needs of a review system that was designed for an earlier era with the skill set and communication practices of a faculty that works with web-enabled technologies*. Our study explores the potential and affordances of “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) to address previously-identified challenges with the self-study process: logistics; faculty engagement; trustworthiness of data; and the potential of a self-study to lead toward improving the program under review.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lankshear and Knobel identify new literacies as “practices that are mediated by post-typographical forms of text” and identify these practices as the “technical stuff” and the “ethos stuff” (2006, p. 25). Extrapolating from the dichotomy they present, some of the *technical* practices for the purposes of a self-study might include: using and constructing hyperlinks between documents; pointing and clicking to access text; providing evidence with movie files; using sound with images for digital stories; and building a website environment for the self-study. Some of the *ethos* practices might include: more participation, collaboration and shared authoring; less presentation of text in a final form and single-authored; more immediate distribution of information to constituents; and a format that reflects contemporary literacies.

IV. RESEARCH STUDY

The research in progress involves the systematic examination of participant perceptions between the traditional written self-study binder submissions and opportunities and challenges

presented by the web-centric self-study. Participants include approximately 100 faculty, key stakeholders and reviewers. We seek to find the most respectful use of participants' time toward a process that is both engaging and produces results. The research methodology is mixed but essentially qualitative and involves the use of a survey mechanism within a web-enabled self-study environment. Within a password-protected web-based environment, participants identify themselves as faculty, members of the internal review team, stakeholders, or members of the external review team. They are invited but not required to participate in an online survey.

The survey asks them to consider past experiences with self-studies – to identify the types of self-studies in which they have participated in the past; the most important things learned from past processes; and challenges encountered (Atnip, Vasquez and Kahn, 2003). The survey then asks them to identify aspects of the web-enabled self-study that have helped them to learn or have created challenges for them. Several key questions focus participants' self-assessment of their awareness of the mission, vision and program outcomes during both the written self-study submission process and the web-enabled self-study process. Other questions ask the participants to compare the helpfulness of the written self-study and the web-enabled self-study for purposes of continuous improvement of the overall student learning experience, as well as perceptions regarding the factors identified by research that affect the strength of faculty engagement in the self-study process.

This study is presently underway and anticipates some early findings by March, 2011 to be presented at the conference.

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