



Validity and Quality in Self-Study

by Allan Feldman

In this response to Bullough and Pinnegar's "Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study," the author argues that in addition to criteria for the quality of research, researchers need to have ways to demonstrate its validity because of the moral and political aspects of educational research. The argument is based in part on the existential nature of self-study. The article concludes with some suggestions for increasing the validity of self-study.

E*ducational Researcher* recently published an article by Robert Bullough and Stefinee Pinnegar (2001) titled, "Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research." In it they argued for a set of guidelines for quality in autobiographical and epistolary forms of self-study research. Their impetus to do so arises from the difficulty that self-study researchers often find in publishing their work:

One possible explanation for the problem of publication in self-study discussed above is that the work may lack significance and quality. Put differently, perhaps the questions asked lack significance and fail to engage reviewer imagination and the questions answered are not found compelling, are purely personal, or are not answered in compelling ways. There is another and more far-reaching possibility: that an adequate grounding and authority for this work have yet to be formed. (p. 15)

Although Bullough and Pinnegar do not explicitly state what they mean by the quality of research, their explanation for the problem of publication implies that a quality self-study has significance and engages the reader's imagination, and the research questions are compelling, transcend the purely personal, and are answered in compelling ways. Quality is also provided by an adequate grounding and authority that can be provided by theoretical and empirical studies.

It should be clear that the question of what is quality in self-study is not an easy one to answer. Bullough and Pinnegar acknowledge this and, to make their task more manageable, limit their analysis to biographical and epistolary representations of self-study. In addition, by asking the question "What makes a self-study worth reading?" (p. 16), they limit their inquiry to the value rather than the validity of self-study research. To answer this question, they turn, as one would expect, to the field of literary studies. By turning to literary studies and asking about the worth of the self-study, they sidestep the question of what makes it valid.

There are good reasons to seek ways to avoid dealing with the validity issue in qualitative research, especially because it is so difficult to define validity. In traditional and technical accounts (Harding, 1986; Munby, 1995) validity usually refers to the degree to which a study accurately reflects or assesses the specific topic that the research is attempting to measure. Because there are few measurements made in qualitative studies, pioneers such as Eisner (1981, 1991) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed other criteria, such as believability, credibility, consensus, and coherence, to replace accuracy as a warrant for validity.

The problematic nature of validity in qualitative studies was highlighted in Denis Phillips' alliteratively titled article, "Why the Worry About Warrant Will not Wane" (1987). In it he argued that qualitative researchers must pay attention to how they warrant their claims to know because they want to be believed. He went on to show what he saw as the inadequacies of arguments for the validity of qualitative research presented by Eisner (1991) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), among others. In short, he argued that qualities such as believability, credibility, consensus, and coherence may convince, but they do not necessarily indicate that what has been written is true. Phillips concluded that while the seeking of truth is akin to Don Quixote's impossible dream, "truth is a regulative ideal" (1987, p. 23) that helps us in our quest for educational situations that are democratic, equitable, and educative for all involved in the process. What I believe Phillips was getting at here is that although it may be impossible to show that the findings of educational research are true, they ought to be more than believable—we must have good reasons to trust them to be true.

In the years since Phillips' essay was published, qualitative researchers have continued to present reasons why we should believe their (and our) findings. For example, Patti Lather suggested that praxis-oriented research that draws upon triangulation, construct validity, and catalytic validity (1991) can convince us of the validity and value of the research. Other examples of sets of criteria for validity can be found in books on qualitative research methods, including those that focus on action research (Elliott, 1991), which is akin to self-study.

Self-study researchers have also exhibited the need to wrestle with the question of the validity of their studies (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Munby, 1995; Northfield & Loughran, 1997; Whitehead, 1989). For some, the question has been resolved by examining self-study as a literary form, personal reflection, or professional development (Northfield & Loughran, 1997); an educative activity (Munby, 1995); or a way to develop practical theories that can be tested in practice (Whitehead, 1989). However, when self-study is seen as a research genre that generates knowledge and understanding that is to be shared and used by

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others, the validity issue resurfaces. In the remainder of this article I argue why self-study is the natural direction for all of us who seek ways to improve schooling, why validity as well as quality is important in self-study, and what can be done to make self-studies more trustworthy.

Self-Study and Existentialism

As Larry Cuban (1993) and others have shown, there has been little effect of the findings of educational research on teachers' practice. The same can be said of the practice of teacher educators. To understand why, some researchers and scholars (Allender, 2001; Feldman, 1997, 2002a; Roth & Tobin, 2001; Stengel, 1996) have turned to existentialism as a way to understand why the educational research endeavor has been unsuccessful in making continued significant change in teacher education. Existentialism is attractive because of the themes with which it is concerned, including,

the nature of the individual, the central role of passions and emotions in human life, the nature and responsibilities of human freedom, and the irrational aspects of life. (Johnson & Kotarba, 2002, p. 3)

An existentialist orientation leads us to focus on who we are as teacher educators, the decisions that we make and the actions we take that construct who we are, and the acceptance of our responsibility for who we are (Feldman, 2002b). This leads us to study ourselves, not as navel-gazing but to understand the way we are teacher educators and to change our ways of being teacher educators.

An important implication of this existential orientation is that for us to change how we teach requires us to change who we are as teachers. Although this has rarely been stated explicitly in the self-study literature, it should be clear that self-study recognizes at least implicitly that to improve our teacher education practices we need to change our ways of being teacher educators. This then raises the question of how we know that we have changed our ways of being and how we convince others not only that the change has occurred but also that it has value. Scientific forms of representation of research (Eisner, 1981), while satisfying criteria for validity, do not allow for the subtleties required to present one's way of being to others. It is for this reason that self-study researchers resonate so well with literary genres of representation such as narrative, autobiography, and epistolary exchanges. To put it simply, in self-study we delve into our existential ways of being in the world, which may best be made public through artistic representations of research (Eisner, 1981).

Self-Study and Validity

If the ultimate goal of self-study is to produce literary representations of research, then Bullough and Pinnegar's guidelines are sufficient to help determine the quality of self-study inquiries. But few of us want to end there. Instead we want our scholarly work to have direct effects on teachers, students, and schools. Therefore, it is political work and has implications for policy-makers. The self-study of teacher education practices is also moral work because it has a normative, teleological component—we don't want to just study our practice, we want to improve it in a particular direction that will affect what happens in

our colleges, universities, and schools. Because there is this pragmatic component of our work we have a moral obligation to not only assess its value or quality but also its validity. What I claim here is that neither a moral argument (Munby, 1995) nor an assessment of the quality of the representation of a self-study is sufficient because there are practical implications of our work. Therefore, we need to know that it is well grounded, just, and can provide the results that we desire.

Issues of validity are important because when we engage in reflective processes that focus on ourselves (as in the construction of autobiographical narratives), we cannot be sure of the accuracy of what we see. That is because when we reflect, we do not know if what we see in the mirror is accurate or the distorted view provided by a funhouse mirror. Our new knowledge, understanding, or insight may be flawed because it is based on a distortion of the world. It is because of these questions, among others, that Sandra Harding, the feminist critic of science, reminds us,

The insights of Freud and Marx have taught us that the accuracy of our autobiographies is limited by what we select as significant, by what we have inadvertently forgotten, by what is too painful to recall, and by what we cannot know about the forces operating in our natural/social surroundings that shaped our early experiences. (1986, p. 201)

Harding suggests that care be taken so that autobiographical studies are critical rather than self-congratulatory by revealing to us "the ambivalences and gaps in our conscious cultural memories and their origins in socially repressed histories" (p. 202). Odes to ourselves are of little value to those whom we want to help. We need to make sure that we are not blinded or fooled by the ways that we construct our stories of being teacher educators.

We also must provide reasons why others should trust our findings. Hamilton and Pinnegar (2000) wrote that for a student to engage in a process of change, "the student must trust what the teacher is teaching is true, accurate, adequate, and worthwhile" (p. 237). Because our work as teacher educators is inherently moral and political, we need to make sure—to the best of our abilities—that our research, as well as our teaching, is worthy of this trust. I suggest that one way that we can do this is to acknowledge the existential reasons why we tend to move toward self-study and autobiography—to understand and change who we are as teacher educators—and that the narratives, autobiographies, epistolary exchanges, and other artistic forms of representation that we construct and create are reasonable ways to represent what we have learned through our self-studies but are not sufficient to convince others of their validity. Therefore, we need to do more than represent our findings; we must demonstrate how we constructed the representations. As it turns out, we already know how to do this.

We can increase the validity our self-studies by paying attention to and making public the ways that we construct our representations of our research. I suggest the following ways to do so:

1. Provide clear and detailed description of how we collect data and make explicit what counts as data in our work. That is, either within the text itself or as an appendix, provide the details of the research methods used.

2. Provide clear and detailed descriptions of how we constructed the representation from our data. It is not always obvious how an artistic representation of research has arisen from the data. It would add to the validity of the representation if readers had some knowledge or insight into the way the researcher transformed data into an artistic representation.
3. Extend triangulation beyond multiple sources of data to include explorations of multiple ways to represent the same self-study. Because one data set can lead to a variety of representations it is important to show why one has been chosen over the others. A danger is the construction of straw men. However, multiple representations that support and challenge one another can add to our reasons to believe and trust the self-study.
4. Provide evidence of the value of the changes in our ways of being teacher educators. As I have discussed, self-study is a moral and political activity. If a self-study were to result in a change in the researcher's way of being a teacher or teacher educator, then there should be some evidence of its value (Northfield & Loughran, 1997). A presentation of this evidence can help to convince readers of the study's validity.

I do not mean for these suggestions to replace Bullough and Pinnegar's guidelines. They remain useful for evaluating the quality of the representations that we construct of our self-studies. But if we want others to value our work, we need to demonstrate that it is well founded, just, and can be trusted. By making our inquiry methods transparent and subjecting our representations to our own critique, as well as that of others, we can do so.

NOTE

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