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Navigating the pre-tenure review process: Experiences of a self-study researcher

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Four years after the first Castle Conference, Cole and Knowles (1998) wrote of teacher educator concerns in conducting self-study research: "Concerns about institutional responses to self-study mainly are rooted in issues associated with tenure and promotion..." (p. 225). The publication of *Studying Teacher Education* and increased acceptance of self-study research in teacher education journals provide an avenue for self-study researchers to publish in respected, refereed journals. Questions of self-study's validity, rigor, and trustworthiness have a long history (e.g., Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). However, questions remain around the acceptance of self-study research among tenure and promotion committees. Institutional context certainly plays a significant factor in whether or not self-study research is an accepted form of qualitative research. Conversations with fellow S-STEP members point to a wide range of support for self-study work. However, at my institution, self-study research has not fit within the norm of what is considered mainstream research. Historically, quantitative research has dominated the college of education. Qualitative research has only recently appeared in a significant manner, mostly conducted by junior faculty. This reality complicates the promotion and tenure process, as many of those faculty working toward tenure use what might be deemed as "emerging methods" while evaluated by senior faculty who predominately conduct quantitative research and whose epistemological stances are echoed in statements to doctoral students (through dissertation work) and junior faculty (through evaluations) as to what is valued as scholarship. It is within that context this chapter takes place. As a faculty member who went through pre-tenure review in 2013-2014, I sought to answer the following question: What are the experiences of a self-study researcher in the third-year, pre-tenure review process?

The tenure process and self-study research

The acceptance of self-study scholarship toward promotion and tenure is not dissimilar from more recent considerations of alternative or emerging forms of scholarship. For instance, Ward

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and Carrigan (2009) argued that, "New faculty members also witness the lack of support when their more senior colleagues seek promotion or tenure with less traditional scholarship" (p. 46). Although their argument focuses more explicitly on scholarship of a professional or practitioner nature rather than empirical scholarship, their argument holds true for research that is not seen as traditional scholarship within an institution, such as self-study research. As a result, as O'Meara (2005) noted, "There is a spirit (even on engaged campuses) of being 'safe,' of staying within the box of traditional scholarship to protect academic positions" (p. 42). According to Hansen (2008), the pre-tenure scholar must stand up for philosophical beliefs in a "tactful manner" and demonstrate the value of his or her scholarship. He noted: "Developing a professional reputation takes time and patience and it is naïve to expect unanimous collegial support for every support in scholarship" (p. 195), concluding with the following consideration, "The bottom line, however, remains that it is the responsibility of the individual faculty member to show the value of his or her work during all stages of a career in higher education" (p. 195).

Although the individual faculty member must become his or her own best advocate, Jones, Beddoes, Banerjee, and Pawley (2014) highlighted one challenge of the tenure process:

For many faculty preparing for or undergoing tenure and promotion reviews, [institutional] documents offer only a narrow picture of the process itself, with much of the information regarding how to prepare a compelling promotion or tenure package gleaned through unofficial or informal means. (p. 328)

They added that such documents "can also produce conditions of institutional opacity and also experiences of ambiguity and uncertainty among those governed through such documents" (p. 338). The lack of sufficient guidance and support outside the formal review letters complicates the faculty member's ability to advocate for his or her work, as the faculty member is challenged to appropriately highlight how the individual scholarship fits within the institutional expectations for scholarship.

Aside from Cole and Knowles (1996, 1998, 2004), there is little identifiable self-study research on the pre-tenure experience (e.g., Ciuffetelli Parker & Scott, 2010; Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009; Gallagher, Griffin, Ciuffetelli Parker, Kitchen, & Figg, 2011). A number of studies focus on junior faculty as they learn to develop/enact their emerging teacher educator identities (e.g., Bullock & Christou, 2009; Grierson, 2010; Williams & Power, 2010), but these do not explore the tenure process.

Cole and Knowles (1996), through a structured interview, uncovered the challenges of a teacher educator-researcher who worked against institutional norms and was denied tenure. The conversation results in questions of what is considered knowledge and scholarship within colleges of education. For Knowles, knowledge and scholarship was practice-oriented, while the college viewed knowledge and scholarship as theory-based and removed from practice.

Diggs et al. (2009) shared the "experiences of three junior faculty of color as they navigate the tenure process, and one tenured faculty of color who is informally mentoring them through the process" (p. 312). Similar to Knowles' experience as someone who challenged the status quo (Cole & Knowles, 1996, 1998), the authors of this article noted "tensions between a desire to teach to transgress and still meet the expectations for tenure" (p. 322). For these faculty members, academic identity was important but there was uncertainty about how to exhibit a desired identity within an institutional setting they felt conflicted with that identity.

Ciuffetelli Parker and McQuirter Scott (2010) developed a long-term mentorship in which McQuirter Scott mentored Ciuffetelli Parker throughout the tenure process. Their narrative stories highlight the importance of mentorship for junior faculty as they adjust to the requirements of a tenure-track position. Finally, Griffin et al. (2011) enacted a self-study community of practice that could help them "become effective teacher educators committed to both practice and scholarship" (p. 880). The article, which focuses on the second year of the community of practice, highlights discussions around the promotion and tenure process in which they found their community of practice assistive in generating a clearer picture of the tenure process.

Method

This self-study of teacher education practices is framed through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, 2004; Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008; Kitchen, 2010). As a form of self-study through narrative inquiry, this research “begins with the tensions and problems a person encounters in practice as they attempt to live their experiential knowledge in practice” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 583). In my case, the tensions and problems I encountered related to my embrace of self-study research that conflicted with the epistemological orientations of tenure and promotion committees and administrators in my college of education.

Data included a journal of the pre-tenure review experience, and review letters of my third-year review portfolio. These included letters from my department chair, departmental and college tenure and promotion committees, college dean, and university provost. Journal entries for this project began after receipt of the first letter (departmental committee) in February 2014 and concluded in June 2014 after receipt of the provost letter. Entries were added to the journal after receipt of each letter and after meetings with senior faculty pertinent to the third-year review process. This included meetings with my department chair, dean, individual members of the department committee, and chair of the college committee. At the conclusion of the third-year review, my journal consisted of 10 single-spaced pages and 5,592 words. Because this experience is continuing – my review for tenure and promotion occurs during the 2016-2017 academic year – I used additional data to make sense of my evolving understanding of being a self-study researcher at my institution. These data include my fourth and fifth year review letters from the department promotion and tenure committee, my department chair and the dean, and a consideration of how those letters impacted my considerations toward self-study as the primary vehicle for my tenure and promotion materials.

I then used narrative coding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to determine the key plot points in my narrative of the pre-tenure review process. I specifically analyzed journal entries and review letters for contexts and tensions related to self-study research. Analysis of the review documents and journal resulted in two plot points that occurred throughout the pre-tenure review experience. The first plot point focuses on the perception of self-study at each institutional level (department, college, dean, provost), while the second plot point highlights the advice of senior faculty regarding self-study research as I complete the pre-tenure experience.

Findings

Self-study as an unknown quantity

“In many presented and published accounts and, even moreso, in informal conversations, self-study researchers themselves voice concerns about the perceived legitimacy or validity of their work within the context of the academy” (Cole & Knowles, 1998, p. 225).

I knew when I was employed that I would be somewhat of an outsider in terms of research perspectives at my institution. Many faculty members in my college were quantitative researchers – largely senior faculty who sat on promotion and tenure committees. Few faculty members, predominately junior faculty, conducted qualitative research. However, I was the only faculty member who conducted self-study research. Although I alone used self-study, I received support from my department chair and dean at the time of my hire, who saw value in my self-study research. Even my annual review letters in my first, second and third years from the department tenure and promotion committee were supportive of my scholarly work.

So it was with some surprise that the third-year review letter from my department highlighted my self-study research as a weakness and expressed concern about the methodology. In their letter, which was the first review conducted of my work as part of the third-year review process, the department’s tenured faculty noted significant limitations of self-study research. Of particular concern was the fact that the department committee asked for and relied heavily upon feedback on self-study research from a tenured faculty member from another department in the college. This faculty member was perceived as having some expertise in qualitative research; however, this expertise did not extend to what our college labels “emerging methods” like self-study, as evidenced

in that individual's conclusion to the commentary: "...Self-study may be an effective tool for reflection and growth as an educator, but it has some important limitations in terms of making more substantive contributions to the field." Additionally, the department committee extended on this evaluation by noting that the self-study research I and others published was "less a measure of empirical research and more a description of an instructional activity." I was confused by the feedback. My initial response was one based more in anger. I was forced to take several days to calm that anger and process the feedback I had received. But even then I was still uncertain about the evaluation.

I first wondered: "Is there a misinterpretation of self-study on the part of committee members? Is the view that my work, and the work of other self-study researchers, is nothing more than highlighting practice?" At that point I had several identified self-studies, or research based in self-study, published in a number of top teacher education journals, including *Studying Teacher Education and Teaching and Teacher Education*. I noted that my work had "used in-depth qualitative data collection techniques to uncover my practice and the practice of others, and to make sense of that practice." I shifted my thinking to what the committee might view as empirical research: "Quantitative measures? Large numbers of interviews? Focus on participants that are not the researcher?"

By the time I received my college committee letter, it was increasingly clear there was confusion about self-study as a form of qualitative research, or as research in general. The committee – and other letters afterward – noted "limitations of this approach could be addressed ... [through] a mixed methods approach, or augment his approach with the collection of empirical data; thereby addressing the shortcomings of research findings dependent on the self-study approach alone." To me, this assessment represented the antithesis of self-study research and the committee's limited understanding of self-study scholarship. That mixed methods and the collection of empirical data (which were readily present in the work) were suggested as necessary for successful scholarship was evidence that self-study was an unknown quantity within my institution and that faculty members were looking at the research through their own epistemological lenses. In a discussion with the college committee chair, she admitted that self-study research was unknown to the committee, but that in the future it was my responsibility to provide sufficient depth to my description of research, especially to research that falls outside the institutional norm. I began to see that descriptions of findings and journal information (i.e., impact factor, acceptance rate) were not enough. What I listed as influential journals were perceived as "supposedly top-tier" scholarly outlets. In future reviews, I would need to include an overview of self-study research – its history, connections to other qualitative traditions, forms of data collections and analysis – in my annual reviews and tenure portfolio if senior faculty were to fully understand the purpose and design of my self-study work. As an educator and self-study researcher this self-promotion can be somewhat uncomfortable. There is an ever-present risk of the charge of narcissism with self-study research, and as a teacher educator-researcher, I had always seen my success as dependent upon the quantity and quality of my scholarship and the impact of my teaching upon students. That I had to educate others on the validity, or even the nature, of self-study research was foreign to me as I went through my third-year review.

The necessity of balance as a self-study researcher

"...survival, for those who engage in alternative forms of research and practice including self-study, depends on individuals' abilities to keep hidden their non-traditional beliefs and practices and show a traditional face to the academic public" (Cole & Knowles, 1998, p. 226).

I had spent the previous two years focusing intently on self-study publications and had received supportive annual review letters from my department chair, department tenure and promotion committee, and dean. I had published in some top journals in teacher education, and as I already noted, had recently published my first article in *Studying Teacher Education*. Now I was told the committee had concerns about the depth and nature of my research and I needed to use "more rigorous qualitative methods" in my work.

I felt blindsided and was uncertain about my next steps. After processing the departmental letter, I considered my options:

What do I do? Do I forgo future self-study research? The committee notes that I should not give up the line of inquiry, but it feels as if there is a hidden but also explicit expectation that I re-focus my

work and leave self-study behind, or at the very least have it as a side interest while I conduct what they perceive as more valid forms of qualitative research. I do not feel this is something I can do. I understand the goal is to achieve tenure; but at the same time can I compromise who I am as a teacher educator-researcher?

But if senior faculty were concerned about the rigor of self-study research, how could I alter their beliefs in the next three years, no matter the number of self-study publications? Even my department chair at the time, who was supportive of my research, asked if I wanted to “fall on my self-study sword?” I initially thought that this was not the case and over the next few days I unhappily came to the conclusion that I needed balance in my research if I wanted to achieve tenure. I wrote: *“I do understand the need to prove that I can conduct more ‘rigorous’ qualitative research. It is not that I do not conduct such research. It’s that my self-study research has been more important to me to get published.”*

After receiving my college letter a few weeks later, which echoed the concerns of the department committee, I became more hesitantly committed to achieving balance. In conversations with the college committee chair and dean I emphasized a trajectory for the next three years that would include more balance of self-study and “traditional” qualitative research publications and presentations. In my final journal entry, I reflected on the review experience, noting:

Although I see myself predominately as a self-study researcher, I have come to the realization that it is not a qualitative tradition readily accepted at my institution. Over time it will gain acceptance, but I cannot guarantee tenure upon my self-study work alone... Finding this balance will be hard to do because I enjoy the self-study work and self-study world more than other qualitative research methods/perspectives.

Even though I stated that my intention was to seek balance in my scholarly work shortly after the receipt of my third-year review letters, I resorted to what Kohl (1994) identified as “creative maladjustment,” which he described as “adapting your own particular maladjustment to the nature of the social systems that you find repressive” (p. 130). I published a few qualitative articles that used case study and content analysis methods from research studies already in progress, and planned and conducted several studies that used qualitative measures more readily understood and accepted by tenured faculty. And although I found and still find value in that work, my intent for publishing that work was less in setting a new methodological trajectory for myself and more in conducting research I found interesting and that provided a form of proof to my institution that I could conduct what was seen as “acceptable” scholarship. However, I maintained a focus on self-study scholarship because I saw that as central to my identity as a teacher-educator researcher, and that line of inquiry would be what my external reviewers – who had the most impact on how my scholarship was perceived in my tenure and promotion materials – would most interact with when asked to review my scholarship.

Discussion and conclusion

The experiences I share are relevant for self-study researchers in that it provides insights into the pre-tenure review experience of a junior faculty member who principally conducts self-study research. Although the challenges of junior faculty who conduct self-study research are not new (Cole & Knowles, 1996, 1998, 2004), this chapter adds depth to the dilemma junior faculty experience as they seek to remain “true to oneself” (Cole & Knowles, 1996), but still achieve tenure. Perhaps by sharing my experiences with the pre-tenure review, other junior faculty can avoid a similar fate of a review that is too critical of the self-study perspective. Additionally, my hope is that others currently in similar situations, or who have successfully and recently navigated the tenure process as self-study researchers, will consider sharing their experiences with emerging teacher educators in the field of self-study.

Finally, this chapter provides insights into the relevance of institutional contexts. By no means is this chapter indicative of all junior faculty experiences with self-study research. Other junior faculty might have mentors and other senior faculty at their institutions that are knowledgeable about self-study research and weigh that research significantly in the tenure process. That said,

junior faculty who conduct self-study research must still know how to “take care to explicate goals, intentions, and processes of individual and collective self-study work so that appropriate appraisals can be made about the value of such work” (Cole & Knowles, 1998, p. 231), especially when their pre-tenure and tenure portfolios are reviewed by faculty who might not have familiarity with self-study research.

Since this experience, I have continued to enjoy success as a self-study researcher while simultaneously experiencing occasional resistance within my institution. As I proceed toward my tenure review, I have had highly positive review letters from my departmental committee the past two years. I have balanced my self-study research with more “accepted” forms of qualitative research. But I have principally maintained my identity as a self-study scholar. This identity has occasionally been challenged by administrators who do not understand self-study as a vein of qualitative research. For example, after a well-received department committee letter in my fourth year, my interim department chair contradicted that letter and wrote that I would not earn tenure on my self-study research and that I should abandon that line of inquiry until after tenure. In other words, I should develop, research, present and publish a new line of research in less than two years. In a follow-up meeting, it was quickly apparent that she and I were at odds as to what constituted scholarship. It was only at a recent conference where she sat in a self-study session when she began to understand the in-depth nature of self-study scholarship and its acceptance in the field at large, if not in the institution. However, such feedback has reinforced my desire to conduct self-study, while understanding the important role external review plays in the tenure process and my need to educate those involved in my institution’s tenure and promotion process about a broader definition of scholarship that included self-study research.

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