

SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

There is a growing emphasis in the teacher education and professional development literature on what is often called “teacher research”—a term that is used interchangeably with teacher inquiry, action research, or self-study. We prefer the term “self-study” to indicate to cooperating teachers, students, and IWU faculty that your project does not involve any out of the ordinary classroom activities or document collection typical of teachers in classrooms, and that the focus of the inquiry is on yourself, your students’ learning, and your own professional development. This document provides an overview of the self-study process in which you will engage for the whole of your senior year.

1. What does it mean to engage in self-study during student teaching?

Engaging in self-study means that you will identify a specific area of professional development connected to becoming a teacher for social justice. Your study will be conducted in an established educational setting, involving accepted educational practices. Your study involves the collection or study of existing data, documents, and records typically available to classroom teachers. You will not be doing anything out of the ordinary with respect to what student teachers always do in their classrooms—except for making what you do transparent and public.

Self-study of one’s teaching involves “systematic, intentional inquiry” on an identified focus of professional development (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1990). These terms are defined as:

Systematic: Ordered ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences, and making a written record. Includes “ordered ways of recollecting, rethinking, and analyzing classroom events for which there may be only partial or unwritten records.”

Intentional: Planned rather than spontaneous.

Inquiry: The generation of questions to make sense of, and improvements to, the teaching and learning experience.

2. Why do I have to engage in a self-study project?

Learning to teach and inquiring into teaching are intricately intertwined processes (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 15). The primary purpose for conducting a self-study focused on one area of your professional development is to improve your own teaching practice and simultaneously your students’ learning. A focused inquiry has the power to energize and inspire you to grow in new ways, and the process is then one of personal and professional transformation. Your self-study will be a written record of this process. Engaging in self-study is one way to demonstrate that you are a teacher-scholar. Ultimately, you will generate multiple insights to inform your teaching and your students’ learning within the larger enterprise of teaching for social justice. Consider the following representative comment from a recent IWU graduate:¹

Engaging in self-study enhanced my professional practice because it pushed me to take risks in the classroom. I do not know if I would have tried so many different teaching methods and different group activities if not for the self-study. Also, the self-study required that I reflect on a daily basis. Because of these reflections, I grew on a daily basis and constantly made changes in my teaching style. So, the self-study has helped develop my own teaching style as well as pushed me to take chances in the classroom.

¹ Leavitt (2012). *Educational Studies Teagle Report to the Dean*. Unpublished document.

3. I am a December graduate and completed research last spring. How does the self-study assignment apply to me?

December graduates have a distinct advantage when it comes to implementing your self studies, since you have already completed an extensive literature review. You are now poised for further study in the actual context of classroom teaching. You will submit a research proposal to collect data to further explore your topic and maintain a research log over the term of student teaching. You will not have to write another research paper, but you will share with your peers the ways in which your understanding from last spring's research have been enhanced or altered.

4. How do I find the time to do research while learning to teach?

Educational Studies faculty know well the challenges you face as student teachers and the corresponding demands on your time. Think of research as a way of teaching – in this way the two processes are integrated. Consider the following observation:

You collect data whenever you gather together a group of your students' papers. You use observing skills whenever you check to see how students are responding to a lesson. You analyze classroom context whenever you plan an assignment or a bulletin board. You analyze data when you look at patterns in your students' grades....When you write comments to your students, you are also writing a research log entry – your summary of the data yielded by the papers. (McLean and Mohr, 1999, p. 135)

Your research, then, draws on the teaching skills you already have and will continue to develop. It provides a lens through which you may reflect systematically on one aspect of your teaching. In this way, teaching and research are one. Again, consider another representative comment from a recent IWU graduate:²

*Conducting this self-study helped me realize that it is absolutely necessary to reflect on my own practice. **I learned that it is possible to collect data, such as student work and field notes, within a regular school day without interfering with my regular classroom routines.***

5. What is the interplay of the self-study and edTPA projects?

You need to collect documents for both your edTPA and self-study. For example, as you assess your teaching competencies with respect to the edTPA rubric, you may come to identify an area of focus for your self-study.

6. How do I identify an area of focus for my self-study?

Refer to the document posted to our course website: *Defining and Refining Your Self Study Questions*. That document is meant to guide you in identifying questions to focus your self-study. Keep in mind that one's questions are continually refined and studies are modified as needed. You will want to take detailed field notes to document the evolution of your study.

Please note that your self-study should in some way address a social justice concern (e.g., issues of equity, race, class, culture, gender, ability) at the classroom level.

7. What if I don't have a topic identified for study right now?

While we often don't know what the actual focus of our self-study is until we are immersed in the process, it is important to explore a few possible self-study topics before beginning the student teaching semester. Seminar discussion, peer interaction and conversation with your cooperating teacher and university supervisor will support you through the process of refining your study question.

8. May I collaborate with a peer?

Sharing concerns and questions with colleagues is always useful. Be mindful, however, that the self-study is constructed as a project that will be individually tailored to meet your specific needs as a reflective teacher.

9. How do I know what kind of documentation or data to collect?

What documents you collect, as well as your research log, will depend upon your questions. Your primary method of documenting your self-study will be your own field notes or journal reflections – which you must maintain on a daily basis. Focus your entries on the specific nature of your self-study, not the whole of your student teaching experience. These entries may include accounts of conversations or dialogues with your cooperating teacher or supervisor.

In addition, you need to determine what student work you might collect that illustrates the journey of your inquiry into your own teaching. Some of this work may include pre- and post-assessments of student learning.

In some instances you may be permitted to tape-record class discussions and student conversations, take photographs, and videotape classroom lessons. *Refrain from implementing any student questionnaires, surveys, or interviews which do not fall within the ordinary classroom routines of learning and teaching.* You will learn the acceptable terminology and procedures for collecting information from your students, and data collection in general, during seminar.

10. What resources are available to help me with my self-study?

As your mentors for the student teaching experience, your cooperating teachers and IWU supervisors and seminar faculty, as well as your peers, can help you to identify a focus for your self-study. Seminar faculty and peers will help you to refine your self-study questions, determine the data sources you need, and obtain IRB and parental consent. Additional resources will be posted to our seminar website.

11. How do I gain parental or student consent?

A consent form that addresses your involvement in the edTPA and the Self-study will be provided to you during your student teaching seminar. Parental consent must be obtained prior to your engaging in either of these activities. The form should be shared with your cooperating teacher prior to your sending it to parents or guardians. You must maintain a record of those parents and children who do and do not provide consent to guide in the use of documents you collect. Details will be discussed during seminar.

12. Do I need the consent of my cooperating teacher for my self-study project?

Yes, in the same way you need his or her approval with for lesson plans and all other classroom activities that you conduct. Your cooperating teacher has the final say and responsibility for what takes place in his or her classroom. In addition, your cooperating teacher may be a valuable mentor as you engage in your self-study project.

13. Why do I need IWU IRB (institutional review board) approval?

The IRB is responsible for reviewing and monitoring all studies that involve “human subjects” (in this case, the children in your classrooms) conducted by IWU faculty and students. It has established procedures to ensure adherence to standards of ethical practices, including informed consent and confidentiality. The committee’s approval is required for consent forms, and the committee requires your written assurances that protocols for the collection of data and student privacy will be followed.

14. Who is the audience for my self-study?

You are the primary audience for your study, as it is focused on your own professional development. Since you belong to a community of teacher-scholars, you will share what you learn with your peers, mentors, your students and their parents at the annual Educational Studies inquiry conference (in conjunction with the university wide research conference) at the end of the spring semester. You may also choose to submit your self-study report for publication in a professional journal that publishes teacher research.

15. What is the timeline for my self-study?

Reference the seminar calendar for due dates. There are several phases to your self-study:

CONCEPTUALIZATION

Phase 1: Wonderings and problem-posing

Refer to the document, *Defining and Refining your Self-Study Questions* to help you determine a focus for your study. At this point in your professional development you should have some awareness of your strengths and challenges with respect to being a reflective, resourceful and responsive teacher for social justice. Now is the time to frame your understandings in the form of questions for further growth.

During this phase, consult with your cooperating teacher regarding your self-study. Help him or her to understand your project as a systematic examination of your professional development that will help you to have a successful student teaching experience. Keep in mind that uppermost in the minds of cooperating teachers (and principals) is that ordinary classroom routines not be disrupted.

Phase 2: Determining Documentation and Data Sources

There is a recursive relationship between defining your question and deciding what documentation will help you learn the answers to your self-study questions. So Phase 2 is actually conducted in concert with Phase 1. What documents or data you collect will depend upon your questions.

Understanding the interplay of your data collection with your question will help you refine your question. Always ask yourself how your choices will help you learn what it is you want to know or understand better. Sometimes you might draft a question and then discover there is not an appropriate way to generate answers given restraints of time, access, settings, and data sources. In this case, you must return to your question and rethink what it is you want to learn in terms of how you might approach the generation of meaningful information. In essence, you want to end up with a question you can begin to reasonably explore during student teaching.

Be sure to consult with your cooperating teacher about what is permissible with respect to gathering documents. Uppermost is that ordinary routines of teaching are not to be disrupted. Think of what data can be collected/documented and be useful to you in the course of your everyday teaching. We will take up the topic of data collection during seminar.

Phase 3: Formal Proposal

Fairly quickly you will be asked to clarify your wonderings in the form of a precisely articulated study question or statement. Articulate your plan in writing in the form of a formal proposal. Work with your cooperating teacher regarding your timeline and plan for any document collection that is required- with the understanding that the project will evolve.

IMPLEMENTATION

Phase 4: Data and document collection

Once parental or guardian consent has been granted, you may begin data collection, excluding the work of those student for whom consent was not granted. You may modify your documentation as your self-study evolves over the course of the semester. You may wish to record your reflections and field notes in a journal specific to your self-study, or a student teaching journal. Organize your data on an ongoing basis for ease of reference. All documents are to be stored in a secure place per IRB protocols. You are required to maintain a field log, which will be turned in periodically for faculty review.

Phase 5: Ongoing reflection, preliminary analyses, and continued data collection.

Engage in preliminary analysis of or reflection on your documents throughout the semester with your critical friends and modify your self study as necessary. During your midterm evaluation conference, identify the ways in which your self-study might be modified to help you learn or achieve your professional development goals. During full-time student teaching continue to maintain your research log, record your reflections, and collect relevant documents. During your final evaluation conference, identify the preliminary understandings yielded by your self study and how they are reflected in your overall performance in the classroom.

INTERPRETATION

Phase 6: Looking back, looking forward

Even though your study will not be complete at the end of the semester, you will conclude the data collection phase by the last day of classes. This is a good point to look back and evaluate your

project – did it go as you intended? What adjustments or modifications did you decide to make over the course of the semester? How did your critical friends and faculty mentors help you think about your study over time? How well did you manage your documentation? If the project was collaborative, assess how well the team worked together and what you learned from the collaborative inquiry process. What have you come to understand about the nature, issues, and value of teacher inquiry at this point?

The end of the term is also a good point to look forward. What do you anticipate that you will need to do to organize and analyze your data next semester? What questions have emerged from your study that you would like to pursue in your literature review? Record your thoughts in your research log and turn the log in at the end of the term. These reflections will be formalized in your self-study report next spring.

16. What parts of my self study must be completed this fall?

You must identify and pursue a focus for your professional development, identify what documents are needed to help you explore your self-study question, and collect those documents. You must modify your documentation as your self-study evolves over the course of the semester. You must maintain your documents in some organized fashion for reference and use next spring.

During the spring semester in Educ 498, you will engage in more systematic analysis of your data. You will also engage in a literature review relevant to the focus of your self-study. Much of your effort will focus on the writing and rewriting of your self-study report.

References

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