
Khalid Mohammed IDRIS & Anikó KÁLMÁN

Facilitation of reflective practice as a collaborative and improvement-oriented professional learning: A teacher educator's self-study experiences

Introduction

Teacher educators' roles and qualities are considered enabling (Marshall et al., 2022) and central (Russell, 2022) when facilitating reflective practice in general and teacher education in higher education settings. However, the mechanisms by which such roles and qualities are recognized and developed depend on contextual considerations (Boud & Walker, 1998) and biographical and institutional factors (Bullock & Ritter, 2011). As such, the facilitation of reflective practice constitutes developing explicit pedagogy of reflection (Clarà et al., 2019), modeling its advocated values in professional learning (Russell, 2022), and co-engagements in transformative action (Glasswell & Ryan, 2017). This paper draws on the first Author's self-study experiences of intentional co-engagements in embedding reflective practice in a teacher education course in Eritrea. Reflection being an atypical yet popularly advocated practice in the study context, the authors, as teacher educators, were challenged to develop reflective qualities while teaching about reflection (Russell, 2022) and enact context-sensitive pedagogy of reflection during one academic semester (Author1, 2023). Additionally, we intended to develop experiences in which reflective practice is not only seen as a teaching and learning strategy but as a professional stance of enhancing "contextualized understanding of what works, how it works, and for whom it works, and can enable educators to make positive changes in their professional practices" (Francisco et al., 2024, p. 501).

Accordingly, this paper positions the intentional and explicit initiative of facilitating reflection as professional learning for praxis development (Francisco et al., 2024; Kemmis, 2024). While professional learning is understood as "informed and formed by local conditions and designed based on the characteristics of the educational site at hand" (Salo et al., 2024, p. 448), praxis development is "morally-politically informed and oriented, reflective, agentic, context-specific, and transformative; it involves taking a moral stand in educational work and working towards positive change" (Mahon et al., 2020 as cited in Francisco et al., 2024, p. 440). A site-based and time-bounded professional action that foregrounded social dimensions of power and solidarity, trust, recognition, agency, and time (Salo et al., 2024) frames the analysis of a self-study intervention on facilitation of reflective practice. Hence, an intervention embedded within and enabled by a community of practitioners not only seeks to explore practices that work, in this case, relevant reflective teaching strategies, but also develop a situated and critical understanding of what conditions enable and constrain practices (e.g., Kemmis et al., 2014). Crucially, such situatedness within practice and community allows for developing nuanced perspectives of possibilities that could be shared beyond an immediate study context (Kemmis et al., 2014; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015).

Self-study of teacher education practices as a methodology and a professional stance provided teacher educator-scholars possibilities to uncover and publicize the complexities of their work (e.g., Pinnegar et al., 2020). Specifically, self-study has been closely associated with facilitating reflective practice in teacher education. On the one hand, "studying one's own teaching is an outstanding way to begin modeling reflective practice" (Russel, 2022, p. 9). On the other hand, how teacher educators learn to navigate such modeling becomes a critical issue as it involves "exposure to emotional involvements in practice" (Beauchamp, 2015, p. 136). These form an additional layer of complexity towards developing a pedagogy of teacher education in general and reflection in particular (Korthagen, 2016). Situated within such debates, this article shares a site-based and intentionally framed self-study on embedding reflective practice among a group of student teachers during a 16-week-long academic semester. It also (re)presented these experiences as professional learning for praxis development (Francisco et al.,

2024) as the self-study initiative was couched in and for collective improvements that influenced my (reflective) facilitation roles and qualities. Accordingly, the following research question underpinned the development of this article:

In what ways did the self-study on facilitation of reflective practice help create a context for developing collaborative and improvement-oriented professional learning experiences?

Teacher educators' professional learning as a transformative practice

Before describing the study context and the professional learning community that enabled the self-study initiative, they will explore discourses that situate teacher educators' professional learning as a transformative practice. Notions of practice-based professional development of teacher educators underline that the knowledge and dispositions needed for educating teachers emerge *in* and *from* practice (Vanassche et al., 2021). It entails the development of a teacher educator's professionalism rooted in researching 'own' teaching, developing context-relevant pedagogies, and collegiality (Vanassche, 2022). Ping et al.'s (2018) review of the contents, activities, and reasons for teacher educators' professional learning further highlighted affective and motivational dimensions that inspired improvement initiatives. It is despite the often heavy workload and limited time afforded and/or allocated for professional learning (Malm, 2020).

These experiences indicate that educators' proactive engagement in professional learning is not only about improving technical proficiencies (e.g., learning strategies for reflective teaching) but seems to be more about "goals and purposes of learning about teaching that go beyond the technical acquisition of knowledge and skills or making teacher education practice more effective or efficient" (Vanassche & Berry, 2020, p. 197). Hence, learning to facilitate reflective practice purposefully goes beyond developing technical proficiencies toward problematizing and positioning roles (Pinnegar et al., 2020) and attending to and responding to peculiarities and complexities of contexts (Boud & Walker, 1998).

Higher education-based teacher educators' competing roles as teachers of teachers and researchers have recently attracted scholarly interest (Smith & Flores, 2019). Such an interest also presents a transformative potential of sharing understandings of the meditative roles of teacher educators in excelling in fulfilling their duties. Similarly, adapting context-sensitive and need-based strategies, i.e., reflective teaching, could uncover possibilities for changing practices within a given contextual constraint and affordances. This article shares such experiences of transformative practices during a self-study initiative while embedding reflective practice among student teachers in a teacher education program.

Context

The Asmara College of Education (ACE) has been the only higher education-based teacher education institution in Eritrea, a sub-Saharan country in East Africa, since 2018. It has established a one-year postgraduate diploma (PGD) in Education for candidates with bachelor's degrees in subjects taught in secondary schools in the country. The PGD program offered general and subject-specific pedagogy and psychology courses and a semester-long practicum in schools. During the study semester in the spring of 2021, the program enrolled candidates with more than 3 years of school teaching and leadership experiences from all the regions¹ of the country. It was unprecedented for most colleague educators in the program as we often facilitated undergraduate courses for prospective teachers with no formal school teaching experiences.

In this context, I was part of a proactive learning community of educators who initiated collaborative action research in improving course management practices in our colleges (e.g., Author et al., 2023). Such an improvement initiative was meant to revitalize our roles in positively influencing student teachers' school practices and redress the low regard for the teaching profession (Hailemariam et al.,

¹ Eritrea has six administrative regions

2010). The self-study initiative on a PGD course titled "Social Sciences Teaching Methods" (SSTM) was embedded in and a continuation of these team initiatives. The study semester reported in this article was concerned with how the college community construed reflection as a mere requirement instead of its transformative potential advocated in the teacher education literature (Author1, 2023). Reflection should be the primary approach in managing the PGD courses, taking stock of them, and developing the diverse schooling experiences of the candidates. It prompted the adoption of a self-study methodology (LaBoskey, 2004) on facilitation interventions while embedding reflective practice in a teacher education course.

Methods

Self-study methodology, mainly qualitative, was developed in teacher education contexts as teacher educators were challenged to align their beliefs (e.g., about teaching teaching) with their practices (Fletcher, 2020). Additionally, teachers' unique positioning allowed them to understand and uncover the complexities of educating teachers (Fletcher, 2020). As such, self-study suited to research situated concerns on whether and how the proactive facilitation supported the reflective practices of a group of student teachers (N=45) (Author1, 2023). The general objective of the SSTM course was to learn the foundations and pedagogies of teaching social sciences in middle and secondary schools through and in reflection. We have developed a course design for embedding reflective practice in the SSTM course by encouraging a series of reflective writing assignments, creating collaborative opportunities, and modeling (Author1 et al., 2024). The required individual reflective writing assignments submitted for feedback (N=8) were meant to support the student teachers in making sense of course reading during sessions and reconstructing their experiences (Berry, 2007). In line with the course objective of valuing reflective practice, a group reflective assignment was designed to support the student teachers, organized into 10 study groups, reflect research, and improve their learning practices during the PGD program at the college.

Self-study is as collaborative as it is self-reflective (LaBoskey, 2004). Accordingly, we were engaged in proactive collegial practices among groups of critical friends (Fletcher et al., 2016) who not only established the trustworthiness of the research (LaBoskey, 2004) but also provided a crucial context for improving my facilitations during the course through our professional conversations. A colleague teacher educator volunteered to attend and observe a class (N=15) and offer her intimate insights following every session during the study semester. These interactions with my colleague, who herself was passionate about interactive teaching, were beyond a practice-centered interviewing and more of a "litmus test for quality which allowed [me] to grapple with the tensions, issues, and problems that naturally arise" (Cuenca, 2020, p.465) while studying to align my belief and practice. As the management of reflective assignments was a commonly reported challenge in the PGD program, colleague educators and the leadership (N=7) were keen to discuss self-study experiences. These interactions (N=5) were essential for discussing perspectives of turning problems into possibilities. Members of a team of educators (N=4), which I am part of, constituted another layer of critical friendship. The other team members were not officially affiliated with the ACE during the study semester. Hence, in-person meetings (N=6) were arranged outside the college to discuss the facilitation experiences. Essentially, the team served as 'meta-critical friends' (Fletcher et al., 2016), providing contextually rich and relevant perspectives and expert inputs due to our closer familiarity and previous interactions in similar collaborative course management initiatives (Author1 et al., 2023).

Data and analysis

We draw from the self-reflective and collaborative data sets generated during the research to address how the study on our proactive facilitation of reflective practice helped develop collaborative and improvement stances. These data sets constitute a self-reflective account of 18 entries, formally recorded conversations (total of over 18 hours) with the groups of critical friends transcribed in more

than 40,000 words. We also used course materials, e.g., guidelines developed during the process of facilitation. The practice and process-centered self-reflective accounts and professional conversations have not only informed the teaching but also established the trustworthiness (LaBoskey, 2004) of the study as they were used both to frame problems of practice and generate action-present facilitation moves (Bullock & Ritter, 2011). The self-study was institutionally supported through a formal letter from the acting dean to all departments. The research proposal was also shared among most of the colleague educators who participated before the study semester started. For the formally recorded conversations, colleague educators filled out and signed a consent form.

The transcribed data sets had at first gone through a sifting process of open coding, identifying patterns within and across the data sets, and generating categories (Robson & McCartan, 2016). We developed the themes discussed as findings in this article in line with the theoretical frame of professional learning as praxis development. Hence, the analytical approach in this study aligns with what Braun and Clarke (2019) called reflexive thematic analysis in that "themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skills, and the data themselves" (p.594). Accordingly, we developed two interlinked themes as significant aspects of the self-study on the reflective facilitation, which have triggered professional stances of togetherness and practice-centered explorations for improvements.

Facilitation of reflective practice as praxis development

In this section, I present two sets of findings related to the main theme of this article. The first refers to improvements while aligning my beliefs and practice in context, and the second relates to positioning the PGD program and student teachers' learning challenges as conditions for developing professional experiences. I translated the extracts of collegial conversations into a mix of English and a locally used Tigrinya language.

Researching self-in-practice

Facilitating reflective practice in a customarily teacher-led classroom context where knowledge transmission modes of interactions are dominant (Tadesse et al., 2023) could seem daunting. However, the experience in this self-study shows that proactively researching facilitation moves affords unique possibilities for professional learning and improvements from within. For example, the following conversation excerpts with the visiting colleague educator indicate the motivations I was developing for embedding reflective practice and how the facilitations needed to be reframed in line with the lived experiences and needs of the student teachers.

We [PGD educators] were just in the business of throwing reflective assignments to student teachers assuming that they could understand its value by themselves; there was a lot that the student teachers wanted to reflect on when given the space and time (Author1, 23.03.2021)

A student-teacher was telling [during a session] that you were criticizing, this is a straightforward way of saying that [he was not] getting what you are saying and you are not getting what is happening among the student-teachers study groups; it was pronounced that there was a gap. (Visiting educator, 29.03.2021)

In the first excerpt, the student teachers were engaged in collaborative reflection based on a reading assignment about their school experiences. After the session, I communicated the possibility of engaging in class interactions when facilitation designs foreground student teachers' experiences. In an Eritrean secondary school context, Tadesse et al.'s (2023) study shows engaging dialogic possibilities due to facilitation tweaks a teacher introduced in a large-sized and frontal teaching classroom. The second excerpt relates to the reactions of student teachers to the individual and collaborative course reflective requirements. It shows tensions between adapted reflective approaches and student teachers' lived experiences and needs (see Author 1, 2023).

The value of researching self-in-practice was apparent in learning to articulate such facilitation tensions among the student teachers and colleagues (Cuenca, 2020) and mobilizing discussions for

improvements. The following excerpts demonstrate such experiences during the study semester as I learned to recognize, manage, and act on the tensions encountered.

Group 5B impressively shared how they intended to informally retrieve information about peer student teachers' experiences in discussions in their course works...informality is a powerful and relevant methodology, the issue is how groups view and utilize their experiences as a resource. (Author1, Reflective entry#4, 20.02.2021)

We advocate for reflection in the college, yet we do not seem to have a common understanding of what reflection is because student teachers are getting different meanings out of the reflective assignments required in the PGD course. (PGD educator2, 11.03.2021)

Interactions with the PGD educators should lead to action, one way of doing that is the planned college forum on reflective practice where you [Author1] should take the least roles during the presentation while proactively and informally leading the preparations; this is important for the imbuing team and collective spirit of improvement initiatives at the college. (Critical friend1, Team discussions, 14.03.2021)

The practice-centered reflective account and discussion excerpts among the critical friend groups highlight action-oriented reflective practice. While managing the previously mentioned facilitation tension between intent and practice, we were developing a "powerful way of listening to one's students with a view to understanding their professional learning and to improving both one's own classes and the program in which one is teaching" (Russell, 2022, p.5). In a way, we realized how the student teachers learned 'informally' and how they could be supported in capitalizing on such experiences while co-engaging in their reflective tasks for their professional development. Such a realization also needed to consider the learning experiences of student teachers in the other PGD courses, particularly in the formally required reflective tasks. The second excerpt indicates that the SSTM student teachers encountered differing reflective requirements, which did not necessarily deepen their learning experiences. Accordingly, the evident need to synergize the reflective experiences for the student teachers, apparent in our discussions with colleague PGD educators, required "a *communicative action* kind of action that happens when people aim to reach intersubjective agreement about how to understand their world, mutual understanding of others' positions and perspectives, and uncoerced, unforced consensus about what to do" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 9, emphasis in original). Such a communicative action led to the organizing of a college-level forum on reflective practice attended by more than 150 student teachers and educators during the semester.

Synergizing the seemingly singular reflective experiences in the SSTM course with the other PGD courses was further acknowledged during discussions with the educators outside the ACE team. The perspective of the critical friend during the discussion relates to the forms of power (Salo et al., 2024) that should be delicately enacted to mobilize the solidarity of colleagues for collective improvements in the interest of fostering student teachers' positive reflective experiences. Researching proactive facilitation of reflection invokes potent professional learning opportunities necessitating collaborative actions to improve practice site reflective experiences.

Challenges as conditions for developing professional experiences

The premise of the PGD program was based on the problematic assumptions around content and pedagogy in teacher education (see Segall, 2004). Preoccupations with 'how to teach' field-related content taught in secondary schools over how teachers learn to teach as professionals were familiar. For example, the consecutively arranged course offerings²[\[2\]](#) reflect how school subjects are taught. Such a program arrangement was challenging as it tended to fragment the reflective experiences intended to be developed during the SSTM course (Author1, 2023). However, through the self-study,

² The SSTM course student teachers were attending 4 other PGD courses during the study semester.

these challenges were not seen as mere constraints but essential conditions for developing relevant professional experiences. In this section, facilitation arrangements introduced in the SSTM course to mediate the contextual challenges proactively are analyzed as conditions of possibilities for developing teaching and learning experiences (Kemmis et al., 2014). Such arrangements include introducing course design, expanding contact hours, and adapting a responsive assessment mechanism.

In line with the explicitly stated and justified objective of the SSTM course for teaching and modeling reflective practice, an assignment guideline was developed to support the student teachers in better managing their professional learning experience during their stay in the PGD program. Explicated tasks excerpted from the guideline stated as follows:

- *Study groups discuss mature key challenges in identified learning practices during the current semester at the ACE.*
- *Study- groups engage in reflective discussions in developing alternative practices in improving identified challenges during the semester (Assignment guideline #1, 10.02.2021)*

The course reflective assignment's focus on the learning practices of the student teachers during the semester was motivated by their learnability concerns, as reiterated by the visiting colleague educator.

They must acknowledge their limited competencies in coping with the PGD requirements, as they said they were not into many professional development activities in their schools. (16.03.2021)

Hence, it was fitting to focus and build on such concerns beyond the programs' prescribed contents and requirements. In a Finnish teacher education context, Kostainen et al. (2018) discuss the significance of course designs while facilitating what they called meaningful learning among student teachers through adapting approaches that allow expressions of concerns and emotions. Accordingly, the reflective spaces created in addressing and improving the learning practices of the student teachers were meant to develop their learnability, which, according to Senese (2017), and in line with my belief, had a direct and meaningful influence on their school teaching and leadership practices.

However, such a requirement necessitated committing to facilitations modalities of working with study groups beyond the formal contact hours and classroom space. Cognizant of this need, we deliberated on experiences with the visiting educator on how such facilitation interventions could be enacted.

So what I was doing was checking if they [her former student teachers] were getting what was being asked of them, they had to know my expectations, so I was deliberately finding ways to informally discuss with the groups which I later found out was called pedagogic talk, it's not enough to explain the nature of the assignment but discussing about it has to be a teaching and learning process somehow, so I made sure there were consultations with every group for the rest of the semester. (visiting educator, 10.03.2021)

Our colleague's experience raises the significance of relationality when conceptualizing and developing teacher educators' professionalism in that our "actions and decisions in practice are professional messages or reflections of one's personal stance, values, and norms (goals) and a particular idea of "good" meaningful teaching" (Vanassche, 2022, p.5). My colleague also used an elaborate concept of pedagogic talk drawing from professional development opportunities, which we both took part in with Finnish experts (see Author et al., 2021). This shows the importance of exposure and interactions with scholarship and teacher education scholars in enhancing our 'brokerage' roles in supporting teachers' learning by connecting lived experiences (and initiatives) with broader forms of knowledge (Knight, 2024). Crucially, the insight on positioning the assignments as a learning opportunity for developing facilitation experiences and meaningfully supporting the student teachers was critical during the self-study. Hence, beyond my commitments to spending time to work with study groups, I was also motivated to research these very efforts in improving the relevance of the course and rigor of the self-study (Author et al., 2024; LaBoskey, 2004; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015).

Consequently, commitments to closely follow and support the reflective practice of the student teachers led to adapting fitting assessment modes. The student teachers' readiness and motivation to improve their English writing competencies was instigated by the consistent feedback I shared on their

weekly individual reflective reports (Author1, 2023). Hence, these interest and reflective opportunities were taken as part of the continuous assessment schemes encouraged in the PGD program. The relevance of this scheme was evaluated with the student teachers during one of the sessions, following this my colleague shared her observations as follows:

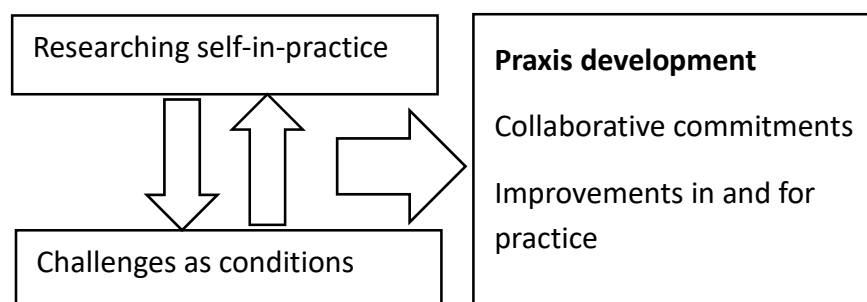
- *What I realized in this class when you were talking about how you give feedback was that they are learning how to do things by modeling. You are doing what you want them to do, and you are communicating how you are following, which means they can also start to develop their assessment mechanisms, which they should communicate as well.* (Visiting educator, 16.03.2021)

The colleague referred to the weekly written reflections we shared with the student teachers during course discussions. This move was part of the course's facilitation design, modeling what and how I was learning from the interactions during the course. The positive reactions of the student teachers relate to Perry and Booth's (2024) experience of when "professional development facilitators model a pedagogical approach; this pedagogical approach forms part of the content and pedagogy of the professional development" (p.152).

Discussion

This article addressed how a teacher educator's self-study on the facilitation of reflective practice in a teacher education context has created conditions for proactive collegiality and improvement stances in and for practice. The self-reflective and collaborative course artifacts showed the value of researching self-in-practice in recognizing and explicating the tension of practices on which the purposeful and collaborative *initiatives* for improvements were predicated. The course experiences also showed how developing a purposeful orientation towards the facilitation practice allowed for identifying possibilities for changing practices within the affordances and constraints of the teacher education program. Figure 1 captures such dynamics as researching self-in-practice led to searching conditions of possibilities. The created conditions, e.g., synergizing facilitation experiences among PGD educators, in turn, honed my researcher' self' because I was learning to "articulate exemplars that represent contextually bound claims and interpretations about knowledge and understanding in practice rather than to seek solutions for practice in ways that are expressed as formal knowledge" (Fletcher, 2020, p. 276). I argue that these dynamics transpiring during the self-study were imbued with manifestations of professional learning as praxis development (Salo et al., 2024).

Figure 1: Researching facilitation of reflective practice as praxis development



The dimensions of professional learning as praxis development that needed to be attended during the self-study, including power and solidarity, trust, recognition, reflection, and time, were critical in prefiguring the collaborative commitments and improvements sought in and for practice (Kemmis, 2024; Salo et al., 2024). For example, during the discussions with PGD colleagues and educators, there were practical views on how we understood the meaning and facilitation of reflection among our student teachers. Such views showed solidarity with the need to revisit our teachings, at least trust, and recognize the significance of the self-study beyond the SSTM course, which led to co-planning a pertinent forum at a college level. This experience is analogous to other educators' experiences of collaborative action research in creating conditions for positive changes during and as a result of their

professional learning in practice (Francisco et al., 2024). This research's experience also manifested the hybrid nature of self-study between self and community (Fletcher, 2020) during the deliberations for creating a *sense of ownership* of the initiative among colleague PGD educators. Such forms of power (Salo et al., 2024) are critical social conditions that foster collaborative commitments among communities of practitioners toward positive and sustained changes in teacher education practices (Demoz, 2024).

The self-study experience further resonates with perspectives on the practice-based professional development of teacher educators as what they *do* within a site's affordances and constraints should be the starting points for their learning (Vanassche et al., 2021). At the same time, the competencies of teacher educators in developing their motivations to learn (Nguyen, 2023) and enhancing their research skills in working towards what Mikkilä-Erdmann et al. (2024) called 'epistemic agency' are critical issues forward. My and the visiting colleague educator's sensitization and exposure to professional development opportunities in our practices factored in developing our motivations to position our initiative as a form of scholarship development.

Limitations and Implications

While framing and conducting the self-study, I did neither assume the perspectives to be generalized nor to resonate with colleague educators' professional concerns. The aim was to intimate lived facilitation concerns and document and publicize artifacts of improved sayings, doings, and relatings (Kemmis et al., 2024) during and as a result of the self-study initiative. Hence, the findings and discussions should be read as insights from site-based and time-bounded professional actions (Salo et al., 2024) for approaching complexity with complexity (Demoz, 2024). Future research could focus on cross-course and institution-led collaboration for researching (teaching) practices.

As teacher educators work to navigate their complex roles of educating and researching (Smith & Flores, 2019), modeling while learning to become reflective practitioners is key to constructively synergizing roles and influencing the professionalism of student teachers. One way of fostering modeling as a practice among teacher educators could be by creating the time and timing for professional learning. While institutions could encourage such a time, it's often the intrinsic motivations of educators (Malm, 2020) that orchestrate the timing of professional learning opportunities with educational and inclusive benefits. Another implication for the pedagogy of reflection in teacher education contexts could be the significance of community and collaboration. In contexts where professional development opportunities in practice settings are neither available nor formalized, building on student teachers' experiences and building collaborative commitments is critical in developing competencies and professionalism.

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