

# Studying Teacher Education

A journal of self-study of teacher education practices

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cste20>

## Creating a Free Space for Professional Development through Collaborative Self-Study

Nina Aakeres, Torill Hammeren Møllerhagen, Hanne Berg Olstad & Rosaline Schaug

**To cite this article:** Nina Aakeres, Torill Hammeren Møllerhagen, Hanne Berg Olstad & Rosaline Schaug (2023): Creating a Free Space for Professional Development through Collaborative Self-Study, *Studying Teacher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/17425964.2023.2212683](https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2023.2212683)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2023.2212683>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 31 May 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Creating a Free Space for Professional Development through Collaborative Self-Study

Nina Aakernes , Torill Hammeren Møllerhagen , Hanne Berg Olstad and Rosaline Schaug

Department of vocational teacher education, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

### ABSTRACT

This article explores how collaborative self-study, initiated by experienced challenges and insecurity in new roles, contributes to the professional development of teacher educators. We document how four vocational teacher educators created a free space for self-development in a self-study process of dialogue and collective reflective inquiry. This study was initiated during the 2019/2020 academic year as we facilitated a school-based mentor course for vocational high school teachers. We analyze personal reflective journals written during and after mentoring sessions, group meetings, and throughout the process. Drawing on the self-study tradition within educational research, we examine the dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities this experience presented for our roles as teacher educators. The results indicate that investing time in group meetings established an atmosphere of mutual trust and developed the self-study group as a free space. Furthermore, we show the value of collaborative self-study as a tool for individual and collective self-understanding and professional development for teacher educators. Our experiences indicate that a self-study group must be self-selected to achieve an open and trusting process. Furthermore, the study shows that creating free space in academia is possible but highlights a need for academia to recognize free space and self-study as integral parts of the work culture.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 November 2022  
Accepted 5 April 2023

### KEYWORDS

Free space; collaborative self-study; teacher educators; professional development; work culture

'I am totally dreading this!' (Hanne)

This introductory quote from Hanne's journal reflects our shared experience of insecurity and doubt in our new professional roles as facilitators of a school-based mentoring course. These mutual feelings of uncertainty became the starting point for our self-generated self-study group. The ambiguity between confidence and uncertainty when teacher educators move away from the confidence of established practices can cause tension (Berry, 2007). We identified this tension as a contradiction between our self-images as experienced teacher educators and the frustration and insecurity we experienced after taking on new facilitator roles.

**CONTACT** Nina Aakernes  [ninaa@oslomet.no](mailto:ninaa@oslomet.no)

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Our contradictory feelings were reinforced by our experience within the rigid working culture of academia. In our experience, academia offers limited space for showing insecurity and lack of control in changing situations.

This article documents a self-study process where we went from being a planning group, grappling to gain ownership of our new roles as facilitators, to developing a self-study group into a free space built on mutual trust. We examine how the self-study process allowed for both personal and professional awareness and growth by focusing on improving our practice in our new roles and gaining a better understanding of the teacher educator profession (LaBoskey, 2004; Zeichner, 2007). Furthermore, we investigate the possibility of establishing space for critical reflection over experienced tension in the teacher educator roles within an academic working culture. We address the following research question: How can teacher educators create a *free space* for professional development through collaborative self-study?

## Research Context

As learning is processed through experience (LaBoskey, 2004), our background and the study context are essential for understanding our actions, interactions, and professional development. Thus, we start with a short account of who we are and the study's background and context which shaped our understanding and the choices made.

We are four vocational teacher educators with 4–11 years of experience in the department of vocational teacher education at Oslo Metropolitan University in Norway, teaching vocational student teachers. The vocational teacher education program builds on students' vocational or professional qualifications and work experience. It prepares and qualifies the student teachers to teach in vocational education and training (VET) programs in high schools. In Norway, VET is part of the formal high school education system offering 10 VET -programs leading to 180 different trade or journeyman's certificates. Approximately 50% of high school students undertake VET- programs, generally combining two-year school-based programs and a two-year apprenticeship.

Although our backgrounds in vocational education differ, we have all worked for many years as vocational teachers in high schools before becoming teacher educators. In addition, we have all acted as school-based practice teachers for vocational student teachers. Only two of us have experience working together as colleagues at the university.

Vocational teacher education in Norway is a collaboration between universities and high schools offering arenas for teaching practice. Student vocational teachers have a minimum of 60 days teaching practice in high schools. School-based practice teachers are experienced vocational teachers responsible for mentoring and assessing students in the teaching practicum. Our roles as teacher educators includes following up on students' learning and progression in their teaching practice by collaborating with school-based practice teachers in high schools.

However, national and international studies have indicated a need for more coherence between education on campus and teaching practice (Canrinus et al., 2015; Hammerness & Klette, 2015; Hiim, 2017; Schaug & Herudsløkken, 2019; Zeichner, 2010). Thus, Norwegian teacher education has focused on enhancing coherence between the two learning arenas (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). In addition, it is recommended for school-based practice teachers to be certified mentors. However,

studies have revealed that schools lack practice teachers with mentoring competence, which affects the quality of students' teaching practice (Helseth et al., 2019).

To improve coherence between teacher education and the practical arena, our department collaborated with a practice school to educate their teachers in mentoring to obtain the recommended certification. The mentoring course took place in the 2019/2020 academic year. The course had a new approach in that it was school based, creating a safer and more flexible learning environment for high school teachers. The four authors along with eight colleagues were group facilitators on the study course.

However, two aspects affected the start of the mentoring course and our roles in it. The first aspect was that late in the project process, project leaders were directed by the university body to use an existing curriculum rather than developing their own. The curriculum they were given did not cover the full intention of the mentoring course, nor was it a curriculum they or we were familiar with. The second aspect was that the start date of the mentoring course was brought forward due to some adjustments in the school schedules. This gave little time to discuss the curriculum or the facilitator roles in any detail as a group, resulting in us having no ownership of either of these aspects at the onset of the mentoring course.

With this background, Torill took the initiative to start a group to collaborate on the course content; therefore, the starting point for our collaboration was co-planning and co-reflection. We worked on gaining ownership of our individual and collective roles and the course curriculum, developing our own course content, and sharing and testing it in practice.

A feeling of isolation in the project and being the 'only one' who felt frustration and lack of competence created a certain insecurity in us as individuals, which further exacerbated our frustrations. However, through informal small talk, we discovered that we all were experiencing different degrees of insecurity, such as frustration, irritation, inadequacy, dread, lack of competence, and a lack of joy and expectation for the mentoring course.

Nevertheless, the situation was complex; although we felt insecure, we felt a strong loyalty to the mentoring project and wanted it to succeed. We agreed that we needed to find a way to embrace our new roles and learn from the process we were now involved in. This mutually perceived need was *the common ground* (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009) on which we progressed from a planning group to a self-initiated self-study group. As such, our interactions, choices we made shaping our practice, and the understanding we developed during the research process (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009) in our self-study collaborative group occurred within this context.

## Teacher Educators' Professional Self-Understanding and Development

Teachers' and teacher educators' professional identities should be considered an ongoing process where the development of professional self-understanding is based on the relationship between the sense of self, the context, interactions with others, past and current experiences, and what is understood as essential in their work (Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen & Buchanan, 2017).

Teachers' professional self-understanding can be defined as their self-interpretation and understanding of themselves as a teacher (Kelchtermans, 2009). This is achieved

through a dynamic and continuous process where the teacher or teacher educator attempts to understand themselves as a teacher by making sense of their experiences because of interactions between them and changing contexts (Kelchtermans, 2009). Professional self-understanding consists of five elements: 1) self-image, 2) self-esteem, 3) job motivation, 4) task perception, and 5) future perspective (Kelchtermans, 2009).

How the teacher educator thinks, defines, and identifies with the different roles over time will also affect their professional self-understanding. Although most teacher educators identify as teachers of teachers, the role is complex and multifaceted as it includes an autonomous research role, an expectation of expertise in the practical field, and mastery to undertake tasks and projects as determined by the university (Bouckaert & Kools, 2018; J. Loughran, 2014; Smith, 2011). Furthermore, the teacher educator's role is often vaguely defined in terms of tasks and responsibilities, and lacks definition and clearly stated expectations (Berry, 2016; Smith, 2011).

Thus, teacher educators can experience a feeling of being thrown in at the deep end, being alone in the different roles, and being unsure of how to meet the expectations the university demands (J. Loughran, 2014). There are indications of teacher educators' professional development being ignored and inefficient, leading to fragmentation where teacher educators lack collective aims and beliefs (Smith, 2010). A situation where universities just assume that those employed as teacher educators know what the role entails, and therefore are offered little support (Berry, 2008), can lead to stress, tension, and vulnerability.

Furthermore, teacher educators' level of autonomy in their job can also lead to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and of not being good enough due to the unstated expectations from academia (J. Loughran, 2014). When teachers' and teacher educators' beliefs are questioned, or expectations differ from or contradict the teachers' task perception, knowing which role and activities are necessary and meaningful to do a good job will profoundly affect their self-esteem, self-image, and, consequently, their job satisfaction (Kelchtermans, 2009). In turn, this can reduce the teachers' and teacher educators' confidence in their abilities, leaving them vulnerable, isolated, self-reliant, and lonely.

### **Self-Study in Teacher Education**

Through tensions, anxieties, and challenges encountered in demanding situations, teachers and teacher educators can create meaning, growth, and greater self-understanding (Chang et al., 2016). Through engaging in self-study, teacher educators can intentionally and systematically inquire into their practice with a view to improving it (J. J. Loughran, 2004; LaBoskey, 2004) and develop as critically reflective practitioners. Thus, self-study allows for further professional development and increases confidence to take on new professional tasks (Latta & Buck, 2007).

As self-study researchers, we understand educational theory as living, as it is based in practice (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Educational theory is in continual development, always evolving, as practice is always changing. Thus, self-study is not about finding a *single truth* (Zeichner, 2007) nor is it about exposing an unchanging reality or making claims about knowledge separated from the practitioner (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Conversely, 'As practice grows and changes, our understanding grows and changes, and our theories grow and change' (p. 4).

Self-study is not well-known in Norway nor within the field of vocational education. As researchers formerly involved in pedagogical action research projects (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Stenhouse, 1975), we feel familiar with the epistemology of self-study, focusing on the improvement of our practice through critical and systematic examination and using our experiences as foundations for research and knowledge development (Dinkelman, 2003; LaBoskey, 2004; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

As teacher educators, we claim authority over our own experiences as grounds for identifying questions of interest for research and knowledge development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), highlighting perspectives and understanding the research setting from our practitioner/researcher point of view. Thus, this study had the potential to allow us to uncover, understand, and develop our practice (Berry, 2007; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). However, self-study research also implies a commitment to contribute to the improvement of teaching practice (Zeichner, 2007) by sharing our findings beyond our immediate context. Thus, our experiences should be made available for other teacher educators, such as through conference papers and journal articles (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009).

### **Collaborative Self-Study**

In self-study research, collaboration is essential (Bodone et al., 2004; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) and is 'a defining characteristic of self-study' (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009, p. 108). A review of collaborative self-study shows that collaboration can take different forms, and the nature of the collaboration influences the process and knowledge developed (Bodone et al., 2004). However, continuous learning and action as well as individual and collective development are central to all forms of collaboration.

Through a cyclic process of reflection, planning, and action, which supports critical reflection, collaborative self-study contributes to professional development (O'Dwyer et al., 2019). Continuous dialogue throughout the process allows for the development of openness and trust. Development of a group that feels safe and promotes critical inquiry requires a willingness from the participants to invest time to sustain the group (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that time investment is crucial in creating conditions necessary for collaborative self-study (East & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Furthermore, it is essential during a group process to spend time to get to know one another and talk beyond the task at hand (East & Fitzgerald, 2006). Not using time for such conversations prevents an authentic and energized group process from emerging. Moreover, if group members focus purely on the tasks and are nervous about not meeting deadlines or the results not being accepted by academia, this creates barriers to authentic group processes (East & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Self-study involves honesty, allowing individuals to be themselves and be comfortable with a sense of vulnerability (J. J. Loughran, 2004). Self-study includes vulnerability (Bullock & Bullock, 2020), as we make ourselves vulnerable by studying our own practice (Berry & Russell, 2016). Therefore, creating a safe, trusting space through collaborative self-study makes sharing and investigating vulnerabilities safer. Thus, by focusing on the group process, group members prepare the ground for the development of trusting

relationships and collaborative reflection, which leads to exploring the participants' vulnerabilities (Diacopoulos et al., 2021).

The process of revisiting, reconsidering, and reframing the group members' understanding in group meetings can contribute to a growing professional understanding (Freidus et al., 2005). Developing open-mindedness and the ability to see a problem in different ways are essential aspects of becoming a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987, 1995). Thus, collaborative self-study, where teacher educators invest time and build trust in one another, can support the participants' growing self-understanding and professional development.

Collaborative processes of co-planning and co-reflection have the potential to foster professional development and change of practice (Martin & Dismuke, 2015). Willingness to invest in dialogue, open communication, and joint reflection lead to development of a *collaborative space* (Martin & Dismuke, 2015), supporting risk-taking and moving out of one's comfort zone. Such collaborative space is similar to a Self-Study Community of Practice (SSCoP; Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009). While collaborative self-study can involve two or more persons, SSSoP is defined as 'groups of at least four members committed to working together to study their teacher education practices' (p. 108). Essential characteristics are that participation is voluntary and happens on common ground. Establishing a common ground for sharing dialogue requires a space in which community members' voices are heard and valued (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009). We find parallels between these scholars' elaboration on the need for *space* and our understanding of the essential aspects of the concept of free space.

### Free Space

Our understanding of free space is based on Kessels et al. (2011) and Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), which refers to a tradition within the Scandinavian action research milieu (Bladt & Nielsen, 2013; Tofteng & Husted, 2014). The philosophical approach to free space presented by Kessels et al. (2011) was derived from the Greek word 'schole.' Originally, 'schole' or school was a retreat where people could experience a form of personal development through dialogue and collective reflective inquiry into the meaning of their behaviors and values.

Kessels et al. (2011) indicate that organizations should create free space for employees by giving them time to retreat from their daily work to talk and reflect together on their work situations and challenges. They argue that dialogue is important and that reflection and critical analysis of our words and thoughts are best with others, especially good colleagues. Furthermore, participating in such conversations deepens the level of understanding and agreement. In addition, Kessels et al. (2011) state that misunderstandings and conflicts can be avoided when colleagues participate in reflection and dialogue in free space, making the most of personal contact, warmth, trust, and openness.

Free space is essential for organizations to develop and is the first and most important condition for change (Kessels et al., 2011). Organizational free space is full of anticipation, excitement, discovery, and reconciliation, and has the potential to create new thoughts, perspectives, and energy, and to erase stress and generate insights (Kessels et al., 2011). Moreover, Kessels et al. (2011) relate the concept of free space as the root of all mastery and consider virtue to be central to the Socratic



quest for meaning. Furthermore, they claim that regularly standing still and reflecting on what we do will improve the quality of our lives within and outside organizations.

Their interpretation of free space is similar to the concept as it is used in CUAR. This tradition emphasizes the need for free time and space and suggests that a structure must be built to create a democratic atmosphere of acceptance for critical input, outside management's wishes and control (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006).

Furthermore, the CUAR tradition sees free space as the creation of arenas in everyday life where people experience an atmosphere of trust and recognition, allowing for independence from social control and power structures (Schwenke et al., 2021). Bladt and Nielsen (2013) investigated creating a free space for inmates in jail in Denmark and noted that free space can be used to recognize human worth despite negative cultures and logic. Other studies have examined the creation of free space within schools and working life (Schwenke et al., 2021; Tofteng & Husted, 2014).

The underlying values for free space seem to be contradictory to the individual-oriented, competitive, and measurement-driven work culture of academia. As teacher educators, we face limited time, resources, and expectations to effectively fulfill work commitments, often individually. As we find similarities between the concept of *free space* and how collaborative self-study can be used in professional development for teacher educators, we wanted to explore the possibility of using the methodology in creating a free space within our organization.

## Methodology and Methods

Self-study is an approach to studying professional practice settings. It is self-initiated, focused, improvement-aimed, and interactive (LaBoskey, 2004). Personal experiences and reflections are acknowledged as important because they relate to social and cultural contexts. We accept teacher knowledge as situated; however, critical reflection can provide useful knowledge for the community of teacher educators (LaBoskey, 2004).

As self-study researchers, we have used 'whatever methods that will provide the needed evidence and context for understanding their practice' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 99). Thus, to ensure our data would give us insight into our personal feelings, values, and experiences, and allow us to explore the rationale behind them, we chose reflective journals as our primary data source. We wrote our journals between October 2019 and April 2021 during and after mentoring sessions with practice teachers and self-study group meetings as well as throughout the process. During the coding process, we added individual narratives of the process in retrospect.

The dialogue and writing process of our journals developed into a cyclic individual and collective reflection process and social construction of knowledge regarding possibilities of and barriers to professional development for teacher educators. Our written journals were the basis for dialogue in meetings, through which we gradually developed new awareness and understanding of our values and beliefs as teacher educators. This new understanding led to new entries in our journals, which again became the basis for new dialogue in our meetings. Our reflective process continued during the collaborative data analysis.



### **Collaborative Data Analysis and Development of Themes**

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, we shared and discussed the data (Goodnough et al., 2020) and worked together during all steps of the data analysis. Due to the iterative process of the dialogue and journal writing, it was difficult to separate the data analysis from the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The coding process started in March 2021, and the initial step was a collective reading of each individual journal as a holistic dataset during our group meetings. From this reading and discussion, we started to develop new insights and derived the first codes, such as *dread*, *group trust*, and *professional confidence*. Next, we coded each journal employing open coding (Gibbs, 2018), deriving new descriptive codes from the 'bottom up' directly from the data (LeCompte & Schensul, 2012).

We continued working together in coding the material in several coding cycles (Saldaña, 2016), which were grouped into preliminary categories. For instance, codes such as *dread*, *frustration*, and *feeling unprepared* were grouped within the category of *experienced insecurity*. Through the coding process, we experienced a deeper understanding of our feelings of vulnerability during the mentoring course and how we developed the self-study group as a free space, which contributed to our increased security and professional development.

At this stage, we wrote new individual narratives of the process in retrospect, including our reflections and new understandings gained through our dialogue. The writing process and sharing of the narratives in the group provided deeper insights into our experiences during the mentoring study course and our group process. We continued to revisit the codes and categories to make our story and research findings available to the research community. Thus, coding became an iterative, cyclic process.

Finally, we constructed three main categories that shed light on how we developed our self-study group into a free space for professional development: (1) the common ground – frustration and questioning professional self-image, (2) investing time and creating trust in a free space, and (3) individual and collective professional development.

### **Trustworthiness in Self-Study Research**

We consider the quality of self-study research as closely connected to the study's trustworthiness. We lean on Mishler's (1990) criterion for trustworthiness as the degree to which others can rely on a study's concepts, methods, and inference as the basis for theorizing and empirical research. Establishing trustworthiness involves thorough documentation and transparency in reporting (Goodnough et al., 2020). For the work to be significant to other teacher educators and accessible for critical review and evaluation, we endeavored to collect and thoroughly analyze concrete examples of actual practice and meaningfully present the research findings (LaBoskey, 2004). However, the final judgment of the trustworthiness and value of the research occurs when the reader determines whether it 'resonates with the reader and provides insight that has the potential to improve or enlighten practitioners' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 50) and whether we as authors have exhibited transparency and integrity in the research account.

## Results

Our group progressed from co-planning to self-study. Therefore, we present and examine the circumstances and the aspects essential for this progression in light of our research question ‘How can teacher educators create a free space for professional development through collaborative self-study.’ The results are presented under the following three categories: The common ground: Frustration and questioning Professional Self-image; Creating a free space built on trust; Individual and collective professional development.

### *The Common Ground: frustration and Questioning Professional Self-Image*

“I don’t know enough about teaching mentoring skills, why am I involved in this?” (Nina)

In the beginning, we felt alone in our new roles. Hanne wrote: ‘I experience that feeling alone creates insecurity in how to manage my tasks.’ Furthermore, we found it difficult to admit our insecurity and frustration. When Nina first talked about her feelings of dread and lack of competence, we felt relief because we realized that others had similar experiences. Torill stated, ‘During our meeting, I realized it is not only about me.’ We also experienced being met with understanding when we started to talk about our feelings. Rosaline reflected on the importance of mutual understanding and sharing common feelings: ‘Maybe it is easier to explore insecurity when we realize others have the same feelings.’

Subsequently, we felt safe in admitting our negative emotions, as Torill did: ‘I feel uncomfortable, too much uncertainty, and so stressed.’ Thus, we gradually developed an understanding of our *common ground* through dialogue (Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009), not solely for preparing for the mentoring course but also including shared feelings of frustration, irritation, insecurity, inadequacy, dread, and lack of competence in our new roles. Nina wrote: ‘I think the group’s startup was about experiencing the same uncertainty, discomfort, and insecurity about participating in something we did not have ownership of.’

Through our conversations, we realized that the unexpected coming-together of us four colleagues gave us a unique opportunity to learn more about ourselves as professional practitioners and teacher educators, but also as people and colleagues for one another. In one of our first meetings, Nina presented self-study as an approach to gain a deeper understanding of our self-image, professional identity, and development. We agreed that self-study could offer us an opportunity to create a space in which we could share struggles, challenges, and develop an understanding of our new roles as facilitators, through collective and critical inquiry into our underlying professional values. Thus, the decision was taken to write reflective journals and meet regularly. As our meetings developed, we used our journal entries as starting points for our dialogues.

A prerequisite for me to feel safe in the role of facilitator in this project is that I understand what is going to happen, that I do not sit there and do not remember how to carry out the mentoring activities (Hanne).

This entry is highly representative of the first entries in our journals. Gradually, when we engaged in a reflective dialogue around the underlying emotions behind such entries, we

developed a shared understanding that our feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, and lack of control within the context of the mentoring course were due to our roles and expertise as teacher educators being challenged and threatened.

I am insecure, and at the same time, I think I have a lot of experience leading similar processes. But still, I am struggling with a bit of bad feelings. I am uncertain because I don't know what we or I should do (Rosaline).

We felt tension moving out of our comfort zone as experienced teacher educators to being novices in the new facilitator roles, which we perceived as difficult. We found it uncomfortable and stressful to be facilitators without a solid foundation. Rosaline stated, 'This is fundamentally about my self-image, about how I look at myself and how I want others to see me. I do not like to appear unprofessional.'

Our free space allowed us to discover that our feelings of insecurity and lack of control were fundamentally threatening our professional self-image as teacher educators and that we needed control over changing situations.

### ***Creating a Free Space Built on Trust***

The group has been our sanctuary; we have been able to say what we feel and mean. I feel that we have shown understanding for each other. We have been a reflective community where we can learn from each other and gain recognition. It is being allowed to talk about one's own insecurities. (Torill)

As Torill indicates, we experienced our self-study group as a free space and a sanctuary where we could be open, reflect on, and learn from each other's feelings, insecurities, values, and challenges and recognize each other. The development of mutual trust was crucial for our experience of the group as a free space, which was safe and promoted critical inquiry. Nina explained the development of group trust as follows:

I feel that we acknowledged each other's experiences of insecurity, that we didn't just sweep them away with phrases such as "you will sort it out, you are so capable." I experienced that we were colleagues who spent time and energy listening to each other, understanding how we experienced demanding situations. This meant that we developed trust in each other.

As we experienced feelings of being acknowledged and were met with trust and care, we began to see our group meetings as a free space where we were taken seriously when showing our vulnerability. For example, Hanne wrote: 'We have been met with understanding and have therefore dared to be open. We have exposed our vulnerabilities without being branded as stupid.'

Besides our experience of being taken seriously, humility seemed to be an important aspect for building group trust. Rosaline reflected on humility in this way:

I think it is about recognition, but also humility. Humble people are often situationally aware; they listen and put others first. A humble person believes she can always learn from the experience of others. Humble people acknowledge that they do not know everything and see support as an opportunity to learn and not as a sign of weakness.

We have been humble in that we have dared to be open, acknowledging that we do not know everything and seeking support in one another.

Another essential aspect of building group trust was our willingness to invest time and energy in listening to each other. The development of the self-study group was a time-consuming process; however, we saw the need and were willing to invest time during a busy working day. Taking the time to get to know one another and talk beyond the task at hand was important to develop mutual trust. We shared personal details regarding our families and work conditions. These conversations and time for small talk were fundamental in creating a free space built on trust and recognition. Torill explained it like this: 'We have invested time in each other, and the use of humor has also helped to create a good, relaxed atmosphere in the group, which has also contributed to openness and the development of security.'

An example of the use of humor is how Rosaline told the same story about going around in the revolving doors repeatedly in our meetings. At first it was connected to experiencing dread over the situation, however, afterwards, during the process of telling and retelling, it became a source of laughter and relief.

I arranged to meet Nina outside so we could travel together to the school for the first mentoring session. I saw her waiting outside as I entered the revolving exit door on the ground floor but as the door revolved around, I couldn't find the exit. I just went around and around again. Nina looked at me in surprise, and eventually, I found the gap and escaped the revolving door to the outside. "I couldn't find my way outside; it must be because I am more anxious about this mentoring course than I realize," I said to Nina. Nina replied quietly "I am too."

However, we also experienced contradictory feelings regarding repeating the same situations and feelings in our group meetings. Investing time in our group meetings could sometimes be experienced as not effectively fulfilling our academic work commitments within the allotted time. Hanne wrote: 'After today's meeting, I experience that we are going in circles. We talked about the same as last time. For me, it's important that we now move on with the analysis and figure out what such a process might bring.'

Nevertheless, in retrospect, we understood that retelling the same stories, putting new words to our experiences, and seeing the situation through another's eyes made it safe to explore our feelings of vulnerability and examine why these feelings were threatening to our professional self-image as teacher educators. Torill wrote: 'I think it's about that our experiences resonated, that we recognized ourselves in what the others described.' In our conversations, we have experienced the others listening, wondering, supporting, and willing to learn from each other. Thus, we experienced that revisiting, reconsidering, and reframing our understanding in group meetings contributed to growing professional insight and understanding.

### ***Individual and Collective Professional Development***

Something really happens when we talk together. Not only do we support each other, but there is possibly some sort of recognition of ourselves and me. My thoughts go back to the safety and recognition in the group and how my self-image has developed in relation to the other three. (Rosaline)

Our experience with our free space was that it offered us an opportunity for professional development through a profound experience of shared responsibility for our common good as individuals and our organization in the pursuit of mastering our new mentoring

roles. Rosaline wrote: 'On my way from work today, I reflected on my development. It is different to meet up at the mentoring course now than the first time.' We experienced that it was easier to develop ownership of the course curriculum as a group, which is shown through the following journal entry from Nina: 'Things have begun to resolve, perhaps it is the feeling of not being alone in not understanding, but also sharing.'

An essential aspect of our development was creating a free space that allowed us to get in touch with our professional selves and gain a new understanding of our professional roles in challenging situations. Our free space made it safe for us to be honest, and to admit, acknowledge, and accept that our new roles created tension between our experienced uncertainty and our expected professional confidence. Through our dialogue, we developed an understanding of how our insecurity was contractionary to our self-image as professional teacher educators. As professional teacher educators, we share a demand for control of changing situations.

The group process made it possible and safe to get to know other aspects of our professional selves, such as vulnerability and frustration. We found it acceptable to be insecure and to seek support, and admit feelings of loneliness, stress, tension, and vulnerability, and in doing so, we created an opportunity for personal growth and professional self-understanding and development. Our openness and recognition of our own and each other's insecurities have been a vessel for our individual and collective professional understanding and development in our new roles as facilitators.

As the group process developed, we observed that our personal feelings, values, assumptions, and experiences were unique but also interconnected and influenced by the culture and interactions within the group. The interconnection became apparent during the analysis of our journals. We assimilated each other's terms and phrases and found it difficult to recognize which of us had said what. This seemed to indicate that our collective professional development affected our self-understanding and individual development. Thus, there was a connection between our collaboration, our actions as facilitators, and the developed individual and collective knowledge.

Our experiences of feeling insecure and recognizing insecurity might help us facilitate more insecurity-welcome learning environments for our students. The self-perceived insecurity we experienced in our new roles can help us identify the insecurities our student teachers may feel during their teaching practice. Our experiences and reflections over our own and others' insecurity can make it easier to listen to our students and acknowledge and recognize their voiced insecurities in the future. We see the value and importance of encouraging self-study and creating free space for our student teachers, where they can support and learn from one another in a safe environment and where they, as people, are recognized and accepted. Thus, we can facilitate the creation of safe environments where students can investigate the reasons behind their insecurities and gain deeper professional insight.

Our process in our free space offered us satisfaction and the joy of mutual understanding, positive rapport, and of working and cooperating as a team where we as individuals experienced acceptance and recognition. As Rosaline wrote: 'Actually, now I'm looking forward to meeting Hanne, Torill, and Nina at the mentoring course tomorrow!' We developed a shared feeling of purpose, community, and recognition and appreciation of our values as professional colleagues and people. Nina wrote: 'I really enjoyed working on the conference abstract together. I think the writing makes it clearer

what we are doing.’ These entries show how stress and frustrations were gradually replaced by harmony and joy. Harmony and joy could be a product of autonomous professional self-development achieved through our self-study process, and our collective development made it easier to move outside our comfort zone.

## Discussion and Implications

This article has explored the research question: ‘How can teacher educators create a free space for professional development through collaborative self-study?’ Our process shows that an essential aspect of our group process was creating an environment built on mutual trust. The group climate made it safe for us to admit our own and acknowledge one another’s vulnerability. Our process allowed us to be open and use collective and critical inquiry to share, explore, and understand (Diacopoulos et al., 2021) why our feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, and lack of control in a specific context were threatening to our professional self-image as teacher educators and to our underlying professional values. Thus, we developed our working group on curriculum activities into a free space (Kessels et al., 2011), which led to authentic professional growth (Dinkelman, 2003).

However, academia can be an environment where there is little room for showing vulnerability, voicing your insecurities, and indicating that you cannot master ‘everything.’ Working alone in academia is expected; however, this can often lead to weaker personal development. Academia assumes that one can effortlessly take on new roles and situations. According to Bodone et al. (2004, p. 748), this ‘bureaucratic, competitive and measurement-driven world of teacher education can be an inclement environment for the study and renewal by educators of their own practice.’ Investing time in our group meetings contradicted our experience in academia, where our teaching and research commitments are narrowed down to specified hours for each of our work tasks. As resources are often limited, time is of the essence, and there are expectations to effectively fulfill work commitments within the allotted time.

Contrary to our experience in academia, where stopping to reflect on insecurity, vulnerability, and lack of control receives little attention, our group process supported critical reflection (O’Dwyer et al., 2019) and allowed for a better understanding of our insecurities and feelings of lack of control. Self-study group meetings using the time to revisit and reflect on the same episodes to gain a deeper understanding of one’s own feelings and reactions is not how resources are used in academia and can be seen as a form of resistance to the current academic working culture (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006; Schwenke et al., 2021).

However, this study demonstrated that creating free space in academia is possible. Moreover, there is potential for individual and collective development and organizational change beyond usual academic settings. As indicated by Kessels et al. (2011), time in free space to reflect and listen to one another is an essential condition for change in organizations.

Our successful collaboration was likely due to establishing our group and creating a free space based on our own initiative as Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) and LaBoskey (2004) suggest. We questioned the extent to which the process in our group was dependent on the four of us finding each other. If we were organized into groups by the leaders of the mentoring project, the results would have likely differed. Our

experiences seem to indicate that the group must be self-selected (LaBoskey, 2004) to achieve an open and trusting process. However, colleagues and project leaders can learn from our process. Project leaders should not take for granted that everyone masters everything and allow time and space for conversation and reflection to create an atmosphere where people feel safe.

This study revealed a need for academia to rethink its organizational approach and recognize free space and self-study as integral parts of the work culture. To allow self-establishment of such groups, organizations must invest adequate resources to help people develop professionally. Two principles could guide such work: Development of a collaborative working culture in projects and collective accountability.

Choosing a self-study research approach indicates our values (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), that other people and their experience and knowledge are valuable for themselves and others that can learn from them (Zeichner, 2007). We would go so far as to say that this is 'life enhancing,' as it shows that we are valuable for what we are and what we think and feel as people as well as professional teacher educators.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Nina Aakernes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5122-9073>

Torill Hammeren Møllerhagen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7271-8386>

## References

- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(2), 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2003.07.001>
- Berry, A. (2007). Reconceptualizing teacher educator knowledge as tensions: Exploring the tension between valuing and reconstructing experience. *Studying Teacher Education*, 3(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425960701656510>
- Berry, A. (2008). *Tensions in teaching about teaching: Understanding practice as a teacher educator*. Springer Netherlands. <https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-5993-0>
- Berry, A. (2016). Teacher educators' professional learning: A necessary case of 'on your own'? In B. De Wever, R. Vanderlinde, M. Tuytens, & A. Aelterman (Eds.), *Professional learning in education: Challenges for teacher educators, teachers and student teachers* (pp. 39–56). Academia Press.
- Berry, A., & Russell, T. (2016). Self-study and vulnerability. *Studying Teacher Education*, 12(2), 115–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2016.1197498>
- Bladt, M., & Nielsen, K. A. (2013). Free space in the processes of action research. *Action Research*, 11(4), 369–385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750313502556>
- Bodone, F., Guðjónsdóttir, H., & Dalmau, M. C. (2004). Revisioning and recreating practice: Collaboration in self-study. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 743–784). Springer.
- Bouckaert, M., & Kools, Q. (2018). Teacher educators as curriculum developers: Exploration of a professional role. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(1), 32–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2017.1393517>



- Bullock, C., & Bullock, S. M. (2020). Exploring challenges to and from self-study methodology. In J. Kitchen, A. Berry, S. M. Bullock, A. R. Crowe, M. Taylor, H. Guðjónsdóttir, & L. Thomas (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (2 ed ed., pp. 483–505). Springer Singapore.
- Canrinus, E. T., Bergem, O. K., Klette, K., & Hammerness, K. (2015). Coherent teacher education programmes: Taking a student perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(3), 313–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2015.1124145>
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. Routledge Farmer. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203496626>
- Chang, A., Rak Neugebauer, S., Ellis, A., Ensminger, D., Marie Ryan, A., & Kennedy, A. (2016). Teacher educator identity in a culture of iterative teacher education program design: A collaborative self-study. *Studying Teacher Education*, 12(2), 152–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2016.1192030>
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. Teachers College Press.
- Diacopoulos, M. M., Gregory, K. H., Branyon, A., & Butler, B. M. (2021). Learning and living self-study research: Guidelines to the self-study journey. *Studying Teacher Education*, 18(2), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2021.1992859>
- Dinkelman, T. (2003). Self-study in teacher education: A means and ends tool for promoting reflective teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54(1), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102238654>
- East, E., & Fitzgerald, L. M. (2006). Collaboration over the long term. In L. M. Fitzgerald, M. L. Heston, & D. L. Tidwell (Eds.), *Collaboration and community: Pushing the boundaries through self-study. Proceedings of the sixth international conference on self-study of teacher education practices* (pp. 72–75). University of Northern Iowa.
- Freidus, H., Feldman, S., Sgouros, C. M., & Wiles-Kettenmann, M. (2005). Looking at ourselves: Professional development as self-study. In J. Brophy & S. Pinnegar(Eds.), *Learning from research on teaching: Perspective, methodology, and representation (Advances in Research on Teaching*. (Vol. Vol. 11, pp. 377–409). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3687\(05\)11013-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1479-3687(05)11013-X)
- Gibbs, G. (2018). *The SAGE qualitative research kit. Vol. 6. Analyzing qualitative data* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Goodnough, K., Arnold, C., Azam, S., Maich, K., Moghaddam, A., Penney, S., & Young, G. (2020). Cultivating a self-study community of practice: Reflections of faculty on issues of evolution and functioning. *Studying Teacher Education*, 16(2), 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2020.1737928>
- Hamilton, M. L., & Pinnegar, S. (2013). A topography of collaboration: Methodology, identity and community in self-study of practice research. *Studying Teacher Education*, 9(1), 74–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2013.771572>
- Hammerness, K., & Klette, K. (2015). Indicators of quality in teacher education: Looking at features of teacher education from an international perspective In *Promoting and sustaining a quality teacher workforce (International Perspectives on Education and Society* (Vol. 27. pp. 239–277.). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-367920140000027013>
- Helseth, I. A., Lid, S. E., Kristiansen, E., Fetscher, E., Karlsen, H. J., Skeidsvoll, K. J., & Wiggen, K. S. (2019). *Kvalitet i praksis – Utfordringer og muligheter [Quality in practicum: Challenges and opportunities]*. Nokut.
- Hiim, H. (2017). Ensuring curriculum relevance in vocational education and training: Epistemological perspectives in a curriculum research project. *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 4(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.13152/IJRVET.4.1.1>
- Kelchtermans, G. (2009). Who I am in how I teach is the message: Self-understanding, vulnerability and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice*, 15(2), 257–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600902875332>
- Kessels, J., Boers, E., & Mostert, P. (2011). Free space and room to reflect. *Practical Philosophy*, 7, 48–64. <http://www.society-for-philosophy-in-practice.org/journal/pdf/7-1%20048%20Kessels%20-%20Free%20Space.pdf>

- Kitchen, J., & Ciuffetelli Parker, D. (2009). Self-study communities of practice: Developing community, critically inquiring as community. In C. A. Lassonde, S. C. Galman, & C. M. Kosnik (Eds.), *Self-study research methodologies for teacher educators* (pp. 107–128). Sense Publishers.
- LaBoskey, V. K. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. L. LaBoskey, & T. Rusell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817–870). Springer.
- Latta, M. M., & Buck, G. (2007). Professional development risks and opportunities embodied within self-study. *Studying Teacher Education*, 3(2), 189–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425960701656585>
- LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (2012). *Analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data: A mixed methods approach* (2nd ed.). AltaMira Press.
- Loughran, J. (2014). Professionally developing as a teacher educator. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(4), 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487114533386>
- Loughran, J. J. (2004). A history and context of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russel (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (Vol. 1, pp. 7–40). Kluwer.
- Martin, S. D., & Dismuke, S. (2015). Maneuvering together to develop new practices: Examining our collaborative processes. *Studying Teacher Education*, 11(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2014.1001356>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4 ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Mishler, E. G. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research – The role of exemplars in narrative studies. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60(4), 415–442. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.60.4.n4405243p6635752>
- Nielsen, K. A., & Nielsen, B. S. (2006). Methodologies in action research. In K. A. Nielsen & L. Svensson (Eds.), *Action and interactive research: Beyond practice and theory* (pp. 63–88). Shaker.
- Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. (2017). Teacher education 2025: National strategy for quality and cooperation in teacher education. [https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/d0c1da83bce94e2da21d5f631bbae817/kd\\_teacher-education-2025\\_uu.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/d0c1da83bce94e2da21d5f631bbae817/kd_teacher-education-2025_uu.pdf)
- O'Dwyer, A., Bowles, R., & Ní Chróinín, D. (2019). Supporting collaborative self-study: An exploration of internal and external critical friendships. *Studying Teacher Education*, 15(2), 139–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2019.1600494>
- Olsen, B., & Buchanan, R. (2017). Everyone wants you to do everything: Investigating the professional identity development of teacher educators. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 44(1), 9–34.
- Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research: Theory, methodology, and practice*. Springer.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Schaug, R. M., & Herudsløkken, K. (2019). Teaching and teaching practice in vocational teacher education: vocational student teachers' and practice teachers' perspectives on teacher education for and in teaching practice. *Journal of Vocations in Development*, 4(1), 53–80. <https://doi.org/10.7577/sjvd.3218>
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Jossey-Bass.
- Schön, D. A. (1995). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Arena.
- Schwenke, E., Husted, M., & Tofteng, D. (2021). Kritisk utopisk aksjonsforskning [Critical utopian action research]. In D. von Heimburg & O. Ness (Eds.), *Aksjonsforskning: Samskap kunnskap som endrer liv og samfunn* (1 ed ed., pp. 193–210). Fagbokforlaget.
- Smith, K. (2010). Professional development of teacher educators. In P. Peterson, E. Baker, & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (pp. 681–688). Elsevier Science & Technology. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.00675-8>
- Smith, K. (2011). The multi-faceted teacher educator: A Norwegian perspective. *Journal of Education for Teaching: JET*, 37(3), 337–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2011.588024>
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development*. Heinemann.

- Tofteng, D., & Husted, M. (2014). Critical utopian action research. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research* (pp. 230–232). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406.n99>
- Zeichner, K. (2007). Accumulating knowledge across self-studies in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(1), 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106296219>
- Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1–2), 89–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347671>