Self-Study in a Pandemic: Process, Pedagogy, People, and Publishing

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Abstract

Since its inclusion as a qualitative research approach in 1993, self-study has offered an opportunity for faculty members to merge two components of their position involved in tenure and promotion decisions: scholarship and teaching. This paper portrays a yearlong self-study of four probationary faculty members, in the same college of education department at a comprehensive regional university, all completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings include the incorporation of engaging pedagogy in coursework, the impacts of COVID-19 on faculty and students, the importance of relationships with faculty colleagues and students, the incorporation of observation, feedback, and reflection as an avenue to improve faculty confidence and practice, and the frustrations and excitement around the tenure and promotion process. Finally, the authors offer pedagogical practices discovered and utilized during the self-study, in addition to recommendations for those who wish to undertake their own self-study.

Keywords: Self-study, Tenure, Pedagogy, Relationships

Introduction

Self-study emerged as a qualitative approach to research in 1993 with the creation of the self-study of teacher education practices special interest group (Bullock & Ritter, 2011). Since that time, this type of research has been completed across numerous settings (Anderson, 2010; Dismuke et al., 2019; Hamilton, 2019; Kitchen et al., 2008; Ritter et al., 2019), increasing faculty members' opportunity to merge the two components of teaching and scholarship inherent in tenure and promotion processes (Fontenot et al., 2012; Kovarik et al., 2018, Welk & Thomas, 2009).

Focus of the Study

This paper discusses a self-study of four faculty members within a single department at the University of Northern Iowa, a regional comprehensive institution. Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley had previously completed a self-study as a pair (Schmid & Townsley, 2022) and wanted to replicate the previous study method, but desired to add more faculty members to the process. Due to our university's focus on scholarship, teaching, and service in the tenure process, we chose to utilize a self-study method to bridge the teaching and scholarship components of our position. Our goals for this project were threefold. First, we desired to synthesize the scholarship and teaching aspects of our position into one project. Second, we were committed to receiving observation and evaluations that extended beyond our traditional departmental evaluation and observations that occur once per year during the fall semester. Finally, we were interested in strengthening the relationships among the four of us, with hopes that these relationships would assist in further connections across our department. Thus, our research questions were as follows:

1) How can the teaching practices of four pretenure faculty members be improved through observation, feedback, and reflection?
2) In what ways might the pressures of scholarship be merged with teaching responsibilities at a regional comprehensive institution during a global pandemic?
3) How can relationships be strengthened throughout a self-study process among four faculty members in the same departments during a global pandemic?

During the 2020–2021 academic year, the self-study faculty met biweekly, observed each other monthly, offered feedback after the observations, and reflected on the experience biweekly. We also shared syllabi, assignments, rubrics, and tricks of the trade to incorporate into our

teaching. During the biweekly meetings, we acted as critical friends (Bambino, 2002; Schuck & Russell, 2005), where we offered suggestions for improvement, questioned practices, and guided each other through personal reflections. Schuck and Russell (2005) stated that "a critical friend acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional learning experience" (p. 107). We also provided support to one another as we all were finding our way through the tenure process and in ways that we navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Kitchen and Berry (2021) described self-study as "timely and timeless" (p. 1), the timing of our self-study during the pandemic allowed us to explore teaching as it relates to student experiences and faculty expectations.

Like Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley's (2022) previous study, collaboration was an important component of this project, as Hamilton and Pinnegar (2013) suggested. We also continued to incorporate Tidwell and Staples (2017) collaborative self-study tenets: "(1) engagement with students and/or other educational professionals, (2) professional relationships across colleagues, and (3) involvement in a professional community that encouraged deeper understanding of their practice, and ultimately impacted their view of the students they served" (p. 92). Collaboration was important time and time again as we shared, challenged, and reflected on our experience both inside and outside of the classroom.

We first offer background literature used for our study. Next, we describe the method of the study including data collection and analysis. We then turn to a discussion of the findings, which includes a presentation of the five central themes that emerged throughout the process. We conclude with a discussion of key responses to research questions, an exploration of the pedagogical practices we learned and shared and provide suggestions for those interested in undertaking a self-study, followed by plans for future research.

Literature Review

The Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group of the American Education Research Association was founded in 1993. Since that time, self-study research has evolved and is an important element of scholarship for many faculty members, providing them the opportunity to investigate their practices and question their knowledge of teaching and their discipline (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015), with hopes they will better understand their practice and implement changes (Bullock & Ritter, 2011).

A variety of methods have been suggested as important to the practice of self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Feldman et al., 2004; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2010); however, there still exist concerns about how to build upon previous self-study research (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). Indeed, this study addresses that concern as the current study builds upon a previous self-study, offering further insights into participants' teaching. Additionally, methods may differ across self-studies as "articulating a knowledge of practice may take many forms, and no one form is more important than another for, depending on the study, what is documented and articulated will vary considerably" (Loughran, 2007, p. 17). Thus, while we used the previous study as a guide, this study also differed based on what we discussed and documented.

Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015) suggested there are three purposes of self-study: "the use of qualitative research methods; collaborative interactions are constitutive for the research process; and its validation is based on trustworthiness" (p. 512). Previous self-studies have been within single disciplines (e.g., Dismuke et al., 2019; Fontenot et al, 2012; Ritter et al., 2019; Welk & Thomas, 2009), however, it has also included transdisciplinary groups (Samaras et al., 2014).

In addition to the purposes of self-study, Vanassche and Kelchtermanns (2015) also suggested that self-study research has four characteristics. First, it focuses on one's own practice as "an essential characteristic of self-study research is that it is initiated and carried out by the practitioners whose practices are being studied" (p. 512). Second, it privileges the use of qualitative research methods, yet "self-study has no single method inscribed to it" (Vanassche & Kelchtermanns, 2015, p. 514). Third, collaborative interactions are an important part of self-study. Indeed, a form of collaboration is "between teacher educators working as colleagues in their local institutes" (Vanassche & Kelchtermanns, 2015, p. 516), an obvious component of the current study. Finally, as previously noted, trustworthiness is used to validate self-study findings.

The role of critical friend is crucial to self-study (Bambino, 2002; O'Dwyer et al., 2019; Ritter et al., 2019; Samaras, 2011; Schuck & Russell, 2005) and was important in our current study. As Schuck and Russell (2005) stated, "A critical friend acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional learning experience" (p. 107). Blind spots and previously held beliefs can be discussed with critical friends, all with the hope to improve practice (Loughran & Brubaker, 2015; Nilsson, 2013; Samaras et al., 2014).

Schmid and Townsley (2022) noted that student engagement was an important element of their self-study. Student engagement was originally measured by the amount of eye contact (Bender, 2017). However, assessing a learner's engagement is difficult as "even those who display signs of curiosity or interest in a subject or who seem engaged may not acquire knowledge about it" (Kong, 2021, p. 2). Further studies examined the impact of online education in the pandemic and how many questions were being asked by students (Caton et al., 2020) and the value of teacher student classroom interactions (Havik & Westergård, 2020). Due to the fact

that “teachers want to encourage their students to be motivated, engaged and enthusiastic” (Havik & Westergård, 2020, p. 489), student engagement is important. Thus, we used Bender’s (2017) definition:

> student engagement is more than merely a passive response to a lecture or even a halfhearted attempt to pay slight attention and complete a worksheet. Rather, student learning—student engagement—is an active, involved, cognitive, and emotional investment in the content to be learned. (p. 3)

Context of the Study

The four authors are departmental colleagues at the University of Northern Iowa, a regional comprehensive university. While we are all housed in the same department, we teach across four different programs and to undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral students. We teach in various modalities, including face-to-face, synchronous Zoom, hybrid courses that include both face-to-face and live Zoom, and some asynchronous components of our courses. Table 1 details the programs, year in teaching at UNI at the time of the study, student populations, and modalities of each author. Our university focuses faculty evaluation on success achieved across teaching, service, and scholarship, with a heavy focus in our department on peer-reviewed scholarship.

Table 1 *Author Programs, Student Populations, and Modalities*

Author	**Program**	**Year in Teaching at UNI**	**Student Population**	**Teaching Modalities**
Dr. David Schmid	Postsecondary Education: Student Affairs	5th	Masters and Doctoral	Face to Face and Online Synchronous
Dr. Shelley Price-Williams	Postsecondary Education: Student Affairs	1st	Masters and Doctoral	Face to Face and Online Synchronous

Dr. Morgan Anderson	Educational Social Foundations	2nd	Undergraduate, Masters, and Doctoral	Face to Face and Online Synchronous
Dr. Matt Townsley	Educational Leadership: Principalship and Superintendency	3rd	Masters and Doctoral	Online Synchronous and Online Asynchronous

Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley previously completed a self-study in a pair during the year prior to this project (Schmid & Townsley, 2022). These two authors had a desire to involve more individuals to expose them to the experience, but also involve more insights and observations from others in a self-study setting. The two original authors sent their previous write-up to Dr. Price-Williams and Dr. Anderson, inviting them to be a part of this year's self-study and they agreed to participate. During the study, we were in our first, second, third, and fifth years of teaching at this institution. However, each of us brought in additional experiences, including three of us having more than 40 combined years of practitioner experience.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not mention the timing of this study. When our observations began, the COVID-19 pandemic and the worldwide shutdown was in its 6th month, having started in March 2020. The stressors and impacts on our teaching, our students, and our lives were discussed frequently during the project. Day et al. (2021) shared the impacts of COVID-19 included increased time required for course preparation, cancellation of programs, and difficulty in providing hands on experience, as many courses require. Simply put, COVID-19's impact on learning and education is substantial (Mishra et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2021) and will again be discussed in the results of this study.

Methods

As other authors have discussed, self-study methods are varied and do not provide an exact process to follow (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2005; Pinnegar &

Hamilton, 2009). Our study was planned as Bullock and Ritter (2011) described in which "powerful and pertinent self-studies have the defining characteristic of teacher educators coming to understand their own practice differently as a result of engaging in self-study" (p. 174). This specific study included common elements including observations, meeting notes, and reflection (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The following details the collection and analysis of data.

Data Collection

Meetings were held biweekly, resulting in a total of 14 meetings between August 2020 and May 2021. The overall process mimicked Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley's (2022) study in which our meetings, questions, and reflections included the following:

1) Questions were prepared before each meeting (after the first meeting, because of discussion and reflection after the previous meeting).
2) Leadership of the meeting was held by Dr. Schmid; however, all participants shared as we went along.
3) Notes were taken by all participants during each meeting, with one rotating participant serving as the primary note taker.
4) After the meeting, each of us reflected on the discussion and sent this reflection to one other participant for review and feedback. The rotation was based on who had paired observations in the previous month and gave us an opportunity to reflect with each participant twice over the course of the semester.
5) Feedback was offered and again reflected upon / responded to by the initiating individual.
6) Questions were developed for the next meeting based on this feedback and reflection.

Although there was a structure to the meeting with check-ins for each of us followed by responses to the previous meeting's questions, each meeting flowed organically from topic to

topic. Depending on the week, some topics were heavily focused on and repeated in subsequent weeks, but other topics may have only been discussed briefly at one meeting. In addition, meeting time was set aside after course observations to have one-on-one feedback from the observer to the teacher.

Course observations occurred a total of six times by each participant during the year. The rotation of observations provided the opportunity to observe each other once each semester and yet receive monthly feedback from one other observer. Feedback notes and questions about the session were drafted and given to the teacher, after which the pairs met to go over the feedback. Notes were added on to each reflection during the conversation, providing an opportunity for deep reflection and further feedback.

The opportunity for reflection was such an important aspect of this project. It allowed us to communicate outside of our meetings through Google Docs and to respond to each other in a back-and-forth manner. As an example, during one of the observations, Dr. Schmid had asked Dr. Price-Williams how often she reflected after each class. Dr. Price-Williams stated that "I do not do this and most of the time I decompress. What I did not say is that I desire to be more reflective and desperately need to make space for this." This reflection was then discussed in a subsequent feedback meeting, similar to O'Dwyer et al.'s (2019) process where they "used the reflections and reviews to scaffold the deliberation and discussion" (p. 148).

In addition to reflecting, observing, and discussing throughout this project, we also served as critical friends for each other. We developed expectations of each other at the beginning of the project, following suggestions from Schuck and Russell (2005) and mimicking the discussion Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley used at the beginning of their original self-study. Serving as a critical friend involved direct feedback, an opportunity to vent with one another,

challenging one another in thoughts and actions, and providing support necessary to build strong relationships.

Themes began to emerge as we progressed throughout the year. Although Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley had experience with the previous self-study and may have anticipated several themes reoccurring, there were just as many new themes that emerged as well. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) discuss, we learned fresh perspectives on old problems, had tensions in our conversations, and had several a-ha moments, all leading to improvements in our overall teaching practice.

Data Analysis

Following the same pattern as Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley's (2022) original study, all meeting, observation, and reflection notes were combined into one file, organized chronologically and in the same person order, and then categorized in a two-step process. First, Dr. Schmid went through the complete file and coded according to themes, seeking like words or discussion points to group themes together. Results of the first stage coding was then reviewed with the other authors and confirmed. The final step involved the review and confirmation of themes most central to our study. Regarding trustworthiness, descriptions and an audit trail including direct quotes, descriptions, and codes were used (Nowell et al., 2017). To demonstrate "clear and detailed descriptions of how we constructed the representation from our data" (Feldman, 2003, p. 28), Table 2 depicts the initial codes and final themes, in addition to representative quotes derived throughout data analysis.

Findings

These findings represent a yearlong study and 100 pages, single-spaced, typed notes, reflections, and feedback. We paid special attention to the context of the study and the four

individuals involved, in addition to the numerous students and colleagues with whom we interacted during the year, an important criterion of self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Our final story is about engaging pedagogy, impacts of COVID-19, relationships between both the four of us and with our students, the value of feedback and nervousness around observation, and the tenure process as pretenure faculty. Although these are stand-alone themes, many of the themes overlapped and were connected.

Incorporating Engaging Pedagogy and Instructional Techniques to Best Serve Students

One of the main focuses of our discussion every week and the monthly observations was the specific practices we used in the classroom. We offered vastly different styles and tricks of the trade. As Dr. Schmid discussed:

> I am always intrigued by how different we are. One of the things that Dr. Price-Williams had talked about never doing pedagogically is something that Dr. Anderson and I do. It also is clear that we all have vastly different styles, yet that is how we can grow is to hear feedback from one another, in addition to getting tips and tricks to use in our own teaching. That is what is making this experience so valuable.

The discussions traveled across many topics; however, we came back to two central areas: engagement of students and the dichotomy of compliance versus engagement.

Table 2 *Coding Link to Themes*

Initial codes	**Final Theme**	**Representative Quote**
Engagement of Students Compliance Vs. Engagement	Incorporating engaging pedagogy and instructional techniques to best serve students	Dr. Price-Williams - I am still frustrated with **engaging** students in class. I have read so many books and articles on engaging students in person versus online. This is where I am hard on myself, because I am what you would call a content expert. I know the material. Dr. Schmid - Observation feedback of Dr. Townsley - Up to 1:29 now **without any talking** from some of the folks...but going into think / ink / pair / share….but with that said, your lecture style is still **energetic, supported by slides, self-disclosure, and engaging**.
Pandemic and stress Scheduling Flexibility offered to students Zoom policies Hybrid learning model Work life balance	COVID-19 impacts on faculty and students	Dr. Schmid - This semester has been so strange. **COVID,** racial strife, the election, frustrations with budget constraints, yet it has all come back to my students. Dr. Price-Williams - Yet, their evaluations do not account for their lack of attention nor their distractions. I am completely **against use of evaluations during COVID**. Yet, I am powerless to this decision
Ability to build relationships in our department Role with students – Advisor, Mentor, Instructor	Relationships with colleagues and students are important for faculty members	Dr. Anderson - I especially appreciate having this opportunity to **further develop my relationship** with other members of my department. Dr. Townsley – Observation feedback of Dr. Schmid - Numerous references/connections to “in your reflection for today” which shows

Support for one another Excitement / energy		how well you **know students and value connecting them** with the content.
Nervousness about observation Feedback on specific pedagogical elements and how to improve them Comparison to other faculty members Self confidence Reflection after feedback and conversations	Observation, feedback, and reflection to encourage faculty improvement and confidence	Dr. Price-Williams - I feel terrible about my teaching all the time. I am just not where I need to be. In consultation with others, they say **you get better every year**. Dr. Anderson - Gratification is frequently delayed in this line of work, but **we tend to crave that instant feedback**. In Freire's terms we might call this the "unfinishedness" of teaching; there is no "point of arrival."
Focus on the scholarship aspects of our position Experiences as junior faculty in the tenure process Connections between teaching and research	The tenure process as a frustrating and exciting time combining teaching and scholarship	Dr. Townsley - Doesn't like that he can't say something in department meetings and feel like **he could impact his tenure**. Dr. Anderson - For me, the **writing side of things** is sort of like a hobby. It's challenging, it's a game, yet it's a necessary part of what we do.

Engagement of Students

A consistent theme centered on the engagement of our students, stemming from both discussions and observations specifically focusing on positive student engagement and challenges. This was somewhat due to COVID-19 and the modalities in which we were teaching (live Zoom and hybrid Zoom / in-person classes); however, there were varying responses and designs. Engagement was often linked to feedback and the way that we rely on student feedback to determine if students are engaged. Dr. Anderson shared that "promoting engagement/participation is something we can all relate to, but getting hung up on why specific individuals are not participating risks leaving people out (in this case, you)." It was the frustration of not being able to keep students engaged consistently that was at heart of many discussions.

Because of our engagement discussions, varying experiences regarding lecture formats versus classroom activities and discussion were seen both in observations and in post observation reflection meetings. Dr. Anderson observed and discussed these for each other participant. In her feedback for Dr. Schmid, she stated

> One thing that stuck out to me was how your "lecture" (which I hesitate to call it that because it was so seamlessly built into the group discussion) was a component of the actual discussion. In other words, each slide had some sort of question or way for them to engage with the material. This is awesome!! Something I might borrow instead of "lecturing," THEN doing a discussion.

In contrast, during a feedback meeting, Dr. Anderson discussed that Dr. Price-Williams's philosophy on lecturing: "If done for long periods of time, it can be okay if done with energy, personal examples, and interactive check-ins. Some information needs to be disseminated. If the

lecture goes on past 12 minutes, that's okay. But if it's for the whole class, that's probably too long." Finally, in her observation feedback, Dr. Anderson wrote that "Dr. Townsley is very thoughtful and purposeful about student engagement. He utilized multiple, distinct strategies at soliciting participation throughout the session. As a result, I heard from nearly everyone in the 75 minutes or so that I visited." What was demonstrated is that all of us valued activities and lectures differently and that both instructional delivery models could accomplish our individual classroom goals.

The planning phase that occurred for student engagement also differed. Dr. Schmid realized that "I do focus more on engagement during my course session planning. I want them to be active in the class, and I must structure that to make sure that they don't need to just sit and listen." This was due to his desire to "get active learning processes into the classroom to maximize what they are learning." In contrast, Dr. Price-Williams stated early in the project that "one challenge for me is to engage students more and to view engagement as necessary and not optional." However, near the end of the project, she stated that:

> Through this group, my book club, and reading, I have learned that my focus should be upon engaging students in the scholarship with less emphasis on delivery of knowledge. I need to amass a catalogue of activities that fit my style and can be adjusted to context.

We were able to learn from each other and provide differing practices for student engagement that will be discussed in the Discussion section.

Compliance vs. Engagement

One interesting early conversation and consistent theme was the difference between compliance and engagement. As Dr. Townsley wrote, "I wonder if our role as professors ought to be compliance vs. engagement. Of course, this is not an easy 'one way or the other' sort of

thing." A lively, multi-week discussion ensued with varying opinions where Dr. Townsley defined compliance as "things you do outside of class because I ask you to do them and everything else is engagement." Dr. Price-Williams felt that the discussion "affirmed what I already concluded: you can ask 10 different people what they believe compliance and engagement looks like and you will receive 10 different interpretations." This discussion also prompted Dr. Schmid to reflect on his time as a student affairs supervisor and the skills he brings into the classroom.

> That is where the compliance piece comes in for me. I expected my staff to be compliant with what I asked and finish their tasks, but I also expected them to be engaged in staff meetings and one on one or small group meetings when we had them. If they weren't, it communicated to me that they didn't care. Now the big question - how did I work to make the meetings engaging? I didn't.

However, now in the classroom, he plans out engagement on a regular basis. Overall, this discussion allowed us to demonstrate differing opinions and deepen our relationship, which will be discussed in an upcoming section.

COVID-19 Impacts on Faculty and Students

For 18 months, the world had been immersed in a world-wide pandemic due to COVID-19 (Day et al., 2021). The impacts on students and teachers, in addition to life in general, are far reaching. As Dr. Anderson wrote:

> I want to best serve my students in the present but remain concerned about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 into the future. I often wonder when, if ever, certain practices that have recently become commonplace will expire (e.g., students attending class both physically and remotely simultaneously, faculty being expected to deliver coursework in

multiple modalities, etc.). I wonder what the landscape of higher education will look like once we are on the other side of this.

A central theme emerged that centered on the pandemic stress caused by work life balance and the scheduling aspects, and the impacts of Zoom and hybrid learning models.

Pandemic and Stress

Our conversations always started with a check-in where we could share what was going on in our lives and classroom. Inevitably, from one to all four of us (more often than not the majority) were stressed. The stress emulated from a lack of work life balance causing low energy levels and scheduling issues.

A common theme was felt by Dr. Anderson that it was "a bit draining teaching in person with masks where she feels like she has to be at 200% to get students to 50%" and Dr. Townsley stated that the "extra energy required to teach right now due to pandemic [was] draining." Stress was caused by administration, student, and personal expectations. Dr. Price-Williams stated that it was "feeling like faculty are expected to give grace and be flexible for students, but not getting that same flexibility/care from university in turn. Faculty are stressed out and *feeling behind*." She also "thinks students expect faculty to be perfect, despite the expectations cannot be realistic right now for anyone." Indeed, Dr. Townsley stated that "COVID is a top-down change right now and can't do anything about it." Our meetings provided support to one another, which strengthened our relationship, and enabled us to successfully navigate the year. We never came to a solution on how to best respond to COVID-19 concerns but did what we feel many faculty members have done during the pandemic: the very best that we could to serve students and provide the necessary learning experiences.

Zoom and Hybrid Learning Model

Three of us were teaching in modalities that included synchronous Zoom and in-person sessions. Dr. Townsley was thankful that he did not need to do so as he "can't imagine what it is like to be required to teach face to face and online at the *same* time," as he only teaches full Zoom classes. Teaching synchronous Zoom and in-person simultaneously caused numerous issues from technology not working to diminishing student desire to attend classes as the year went on. For example, in classes where in-person or Zoom attendance was able to be chosen by students, in-class attendance could be as low as one person out of a class of 15. Attempting to plan for class sessions without knowing the actual in-person attendance proved to be very frustrating and almost impossible. As Dr. Price-Williams discussed, "the pressure to teach students across two mediums is not desired. The inability to plan effectively undermines the organization of my class. I can plan something that I believe will work and then it does not." However, Dr. Price-Williams also discussed how "we are like choreographers that way. Sets up the classroom in that way. She thinks first what she can do in the classroom and then how it works in Zoom." Finally, Dr. Townsley was "wondering how I can move beyond simply teaching *through* this disruption and find ways to teach *to* it (e.g., what issues are being raised in the current moment that I can explore with my students)?" We all needed to pivot and be ready to incorporate various instructional strategies.

Due to Zoom classes being a reality for all four of us, we had numerous discussions on Zoom policies and behaviors. Some professors had set up Zoom expectations from the beginning, whereas Dr. Anderson "naively assumed they were beyond talking about how to work with Zoom and behave." Cameras and the requirement to be on during Zoom sessions also had varying responses. Whereas, Dr. Schmid required his students' cameras to be on, it was also in how individuals responded to cameras being turned off that a large conversation was held. Some

of us messaged individuals during class using the Zoom chat function, but others would send emails afterwards or give a blanket reminder statement while in class. Finally, Dr. Price-Williams had stated that participation points could not be earned if cameras were off; surprisingly, they all turned on.

Another important subtheme was the flexibility offered to students because of COVID-19. Dr. Anderson "believes the accessibility flexibility expectations have turned into convenience expectations on the part of students. These are two separate things from her perspective," to which Dr. Townsley immediately agreed. This also connected back to the stress we all experienced as Dr. Anderson stated:

> students expect (endless) flexibility, accommodation, turn-around time, etc. without seeing us as whole human beings that are flawed, have lives, families, etc. For example, I think the notion that faculty can't (or shouldn't) expect certain behavior from students when taking a class on Zoom might fall into this model.

There existed different means to be flexible where some of us would be as accommodating as possible but others wanted to draw a harder line on Zoom attendance and other policies. Neither position was evaluated as the most reasonable, because it truly was dependent on individual style; however, again, tips were learned throughout our discussion that could be either immediately instituted into class sessions or saved for future semesters.

Finally, Dr. Anderson summed up COVID-19 and its future impact:

> I am just interested to see where higher education goes from here. I think COVID will definitely have lasting effects on higher education (and P–12) but I don't think we can truly get a sense of what those effects might be just yet. I do think it's important that we

begin having normative discussions surrounding which practices we will keep from this time, and which ones will be the 'ladder we kick away' when things go back to 'normal.'

The summary was so fitting as we consistently kept talking about "after the pandemic," all the time realizing that impacts will be felt for an extended period. We did worry about its overall impact on our evaluations. Dr. Price-Williams worried about student evaluations – "she feels that they are going to be tough and gruesome - they will be tough on every professor as a reflection of their time during COVID." However, it is our hope that we were able to offer our students learning experiences and support during this pandemic.

Relationships with Colleagues and Students are Important for Faculty Members

This topic was initially discussed during our first meeting and was repeated time and time again, creating a central theme. One of Dr. Anderson's first reflections stated that "higher education in general can make us feel like we are working in isolation if we don't deliberately do this type of work, so I feel grateful to be a part of this." Relationships covered not only our personal connections, but relationships with students as well.

Faculty Colleague Relationships

This project afforded all of us an opportunity to get to know one another better. As Dr. Schmid stated, "This group gives me life! I love the laughter, the stories, and the connecting back to what we are doing. I love the insights that people offer and the tips this week are something that I am going to use." At times, it was also because of the pandemic where we were so isolated, even impacting the two introverts in the group. As Dr. Townsley stated, "never thought I would say this, but it was *wonderful to talk with someone today*, albeit via Zoom. I consider myself to be an introvert, yet the pandemic is beginning to wear on me." Dr. Anderson also added that "like always, I left our meeting feeling very energized . . . I have grown attached

to these meet-ups. I am a hopeless introvert and even I MISS PEOPLE!" Additionally, Dr. Anderson "did not anticipate how much I would grow to 'need' these check-ins. Especially with COVID, I have been feeling isolated and these meetings remind me that I am not alone in the professional challenges I am facing."

The connections we developed mirrored Dr. Schmid's and Dr. Townsley's (2022) previous study where the trust that was developed allowed us to go deeper and deeper with our observations, conversations, and reflections. As Dr. Townsley stated, "perhaps the fact that we (the group) know each other better now is aiding in my comfortability sharing." There was also a deeper connection for Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley as we continued into our 2nd year of self-study. During one session, we were able to explore equity, diversity, and inclusion practices and feelings. Dr. Townsley stated that "early in last year's conversations, I probably wouldn't have felt as comfortable discussing this topic with you. Now that we've gotten to know each other even more during the past year, it was the right topic at the right time." This relationship has proven so beneficial as tenure processes are being entered, or simply the ability to support one another and just enjoy life in the office.

One final important relationship element was the support demonstrated time and time again through difficult feedback sessions, responding to critical incidents, or just when life in general was difficult. As Dr. Schmid wrote, "I can be both supported and challenged while in these meetings to make me better and also to feel good about the things that I do well." Dr. Price-Williams appreciated the time in the group as "each time we meet in this space, I find it supportive. I also learn a great deal whether that be specific to the culture of the University of Northern Iowa, teaching strategies, or challenge and support." Dr. Anderson appreciated words of encouragement from Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley stated that it was "good that we had each

other, and it was a shelter from the storm, a safe place to share his thoughts and struggles." All in all, the relationships built have continued into the years beyond our self-study.

Faculty – Student Relationships

In addition to the important relationships built among the four of us, a subtheme also emerged regarding faculty–student relationships. As Dr. Schmid stated:

> I think another piece that works into this is the relationship that I attempt to cultivate with my students. They come to me for class things, professional advice, and at times personal advice. This was the same type of relationship that I cultivated when I was in student affairs and have attempted to continue it now.

We had long discussions on the roles of faculty, advisor, and mentor, with varying values on each of those relationships. Dr. Schmid has "valued the relationships that I build, which in turn typically morphs into mentorship roles. However, the lack of boundaries that I place at times bite me in the butt." He also received this mentor role from his program coordinator in graduate school and assumed that it was what was important to offer to his students. Dr. Price-Williams noted that mentorship roles are not something that she can make time for right now and that mentors should ideally be someone from the field. However, Dr. Townsley discussed that he too felt it was his role to mentor the students in his program.

Observations also allowed insight into faculty–student relationships. During Dr. Schmid's observation of Dr. Anderson, he noted that "you talk about the fact that you know that you can leave them on a negative note - all of this tells me that you talk to them about why you do what you do, which makes you so accessible as a faculty member." During another observation, Dr. Townsley offered feedback for Dr. Price-Williams, "you thanked a student by saying something like 'Thank you for being so transparent with your previous experiences.' I

really appreciate this sort of thing, especially when students share something particularly personal or are vulnerable during class." Dr. Townsley also offered feedback for Dr. Schmid "anticipate this is what makes students relate to you so well!" He continued that "it is clear that you mentor your students outside of the classroom, both during their time in the program and beyond." All these observations demonstrate how we relate to our students in the classroom, but it was also apparent how relationships extended outside of the classroom.

Observation, Feedback, and Reflection to Encourage Faculty Improvement and Confidence

A central part of this experience was the opportunity to be observed by three other individuals during each semester, receive feedback, and be able to respond to the feedback for clarification or a deeper understanding. Observations provided knowledge for each of us to incorporate into our teaching practice, in addition to learning why we do what we do. Dr. Townsley summed our experiences with feedback when stating that he is "incredibly appreciative of Dr. Anderson's feedback and affirmation. Without this safe space to reflect and learn from a non-evaluative 'outsider,' I am confident that I would be in a much deeper pedagogical and perhaps emotional 'drought' right now." Subthemes emerged including nervousness about observations, how we measure ourselves both alone and in comparison with others, and the ways we receive informal feedback from our students.

Nervousness about Observation

Concerns about nervousness with observations, either currently or in the past, were a constant subtheme. We began this process in the fall when we would each also be observed by three tenure and promotion subcommittee members. Thus, combining tenure and promotion and

self-study observations, each participant would be observed teaching a total of nine times during the fall semester.

The amount of nervousness each of us felt differed. Dr. Price-Williams discussed how nervous she felt, but "realize it is necessary and required for my betterment. I will just need to suck it up and be receptive to feedback." In addition, she stated that "as someone who could become a little more comfortable with critical feedback, 7 or 8 total observations is an overload for me," yet she reflected at the end of the project that "the numerous observations are working to desensitize me from the event. This is a good thing, because it helps me to bypass the stress of the observation and focus on the feedback." Dr. Anderson agreed with Dr. Price-Williams in that she:

> gets physically nervous before teaching (heart rate increase, sweaty, generally on edge) when I know I'm being observed. I usually get over it within the first few minutes of class, but I really want to overcome this and I think this project has been helpful for pushing my comfort level a bit.

Conversely, Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley, who had observed each other six times over the course of the previous year's self-study, did not find it as nerve wracking. Dr. Schmid wrote that he was:

> thankful for Dr. Townsley being my first observation this year, but it was also interesting, as there was not one ounce of nervousness or tightness, and I believe that this can be attributed to our project last year. Being observed is getting commonplace and I appreciate that as it will continue to assist me in my focus on my teaching pedagogy and practice.

Thus, as Dr. Price-Williams had reached at the end of the project, the self-study experience had made observations much less stress inducing, ideally leading to more calm experiences when being observed for tenure and promotion in the future.

Self-Measurement and Comparison to Others

Another subtheme emerged regarding how we measure ourselves and others, either based on each class session or on student feedback. Both Dr. Schmid and Dr. Price-Williams discussed focusing on student feedback and that if they receive numerous positive comments and one negative comment, they fester over the negative comment. For in class, immediate feedback, Dr. Anderson shared that "we tend to use superficial metrics such as head nodding or laughter and while those may be important cues, they certainly don't tell the entire story." We often looked for signs of engaged students, evaluating our teaching practice on what we were seeing in person or on the Zoom cameras. Dr. Price-Williams confirmed that "we erroneously measure how well we did based on emotional and physical response of the student," yet we all discussed in some fashion that we did pay attention to it. Thus, the question remains as to why we would want to rely on this sole type of feedback.

A second recurring subtheme was how we compared ourselves to others, including imposter syndrome. As Dr. Anderson wrote, "I know I should be enjoying the process of growing into this position but lately it feels like there are a lot of growing pains – having trouble finding work/life balance etc. Imposter syndrome in full effect these days." Dr. Price-Williams was experiencing being compared to other faculty in the program, and in turn, was comparing herself to others in the group. She shared that:

> I feel less skilled and competent than Dr. Townsley, Dr. Schmid, and Dr. Anderson (no order implied). They seem to handle things so much more effectively. Sometimes, I come

> into this group meeting with a feeling of junior status. This might be all in my head. What I really hope for is the space to grow and listen in this self-study to identify how I might strengthen my own pedagogy.

However, after discussions of being compared to other faculty in the program, Dr. Price-Williams wrote that "after much reflection, I realized it is normal for the students to evaluate me differently. They had many classes with one specific professor and are very familiar with their approach and style." We were able to reflect deeply on our experience and evaluate ourselves more holistically, as compared to just reflecting on our comparison to others.

Informal Student Feedback

A final subtheme emerged as to how student feedback played into our self-evaluation and its impact on making changes in our pedagogical process and philosophy. Dr. Townsley discussed Dr. Schmid's practice of meeting with each student midway through the semester for informal feedback. Although he was impressed with this process, he also questioned "the degree to which the lack of anonymity affects students' willingness to be honest about their experiences." However, Dr. Schmid has been able to make changes to his teaching based on midsemester feedback, and the changes have been noted in his formal end of semester feedback.

An additional component was when we shared anonymous student feedback with our classes and either asked for further clarification or responded to the feedback. Dr. Schmid stated in feedback for Dr. Price-Williams:

> I like how you went over the feedback that you received - it demonstrates your care for the class and how you are going to respond to the feedback. One of the things I learned is that telling them WHY you are doing something is so very important - it lets them into

your plans and thus they can see why you are doing what you are doing. This clarity helps so much.

Dr. Townsley also went through this process with one of his difficult classes and was able to gain further information in how improvements could be instituted. Through all elements of the discussion on feedback, we valued the feedback offered and the ways in which it was incorporated into our practice.

The Tenure Process as a Frustrating and Exciting Time Combining Teaching and Scholarship

The final prevalent theme throughout our work was focused on the tenure process and the requirements for teaching, service, and scholarship. Although our institution focuses heavily on teaching in the tenure process, a faculty member must be strong in all three areas to receive tenure. Dr. Price-Williams discussed the phrase "publish or perish," and it was a recurrent discussion topic. This theme connected two processes – (a) the tenure and promotion process and (b) the publication process.

Tenure and Promotion Process

The tenure and promotion process as a whole was a recurrent subtheme, with one long conversation about the value of tenure. Dr. Price-Williams had strong feelings about the process as "tenure means the autonomy to make decisions, informing practice, don't have people telling what to teach, when to teach, who to teach." Additionally, she felt that "for me as a first-generation college student, tenure or better yet, full professor is the epitome of success in academia. Few women make it to full professor for a myriad of reasons. I want to be one of the few," confirming posts by Cummings (2020) and Turner Kelly (2019). Similarly, Catalyst (2020) reported that "while women represent just over half (52.9%) of Assistant Professors and are near

parity (46.4%) among Associate Professors, they accounted for barely over a third (34.3%) of Professors" (para. 12).

We also discussed the importance of how all three elements (i.e., teaching, service, and scholarship) combined for the tenure and promotion process, but our department had focused so heavily on the scholarship aspect that it seemed to be more heavily weighted. Dr. Price-Williams had a humorous analogy; she felt that scholarship is like making cookies, you always have to prep them, bake them, and always have something in the oven at all times. However, not only was scholarship a concern, Dr. Price-Williams also discussed frustration that "teaching evaluations will still impact tenure, even with the impact of COVID." She felt that we should have the choice whether those are used or not.

Publication Process

A second consistent vein in this theme was concerns about the publication process. We all had numerous issues with the current status of reviews from some journals and realized that reviewers make or break your inclusion of the article. Dr. Anderson recently had feedback where one reviewer loved it but the other had methodological issues. She also had an experience where a journal had sent her a letter of acceptance with changes, followed by a flat rejection letter, which was received after evaluation materials had already been submitted. Even with these challenges, she feels as though "the writing side of things is sort of like a hobby. It's challenging, it's a game, yet it's a necessary part of what we do." She followed that up with the desire to always have the research be useful, as if it is not, "what is the point of doing the research?"

One final comment summed up the entire experience, even though it was taken in the first week. Dr. Townsley stated that "the pandemic seems to be here for a while. Having others in the

department to learn from, vent, and work alongside is refreshing." The study truly did offer an opportunity for reflection, observation, learning, and relationships.

Discussion

We first respond to our research questions and then discuss pedagogical practices we used for teaching that may be of benefit to others. Finally, we discuss recommendations for anyone interested in taking on a self-study and where we plan to go in the future.

Response to Research Questions

This self-study sought to answer three research questions. The first question was "How can the teaching practices of four pre-tenure faculty members be improved through observation, feedback, and reflection?" We learned so much through this process, from receiving honest, timely feedback to improve future classes to specific pedagogical practices. As Anderson et al. (2020) cared about the discipline, students, and both teaching and learning, we too focused on our specific disciplines, but also were able to offer insights into each other's teaching. For example, Dr. Schmid observed Dr. Townsley's class and was able to offer feedback on techniques used, but also noted how it had been more than an hour into class without some students speaking in discussion groups. Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley were then able to process through this feedback and Dr. Townsley was able to incorporate more students in the next session. We also offered differing pedagogical practices that could be employed in future sessions. As an example, Dr. Townsley shared that he learned a new skill – 1-2-3, where students all type into the chat at once on Zoom. Other group members implemented this technique as a result of Dr. Townsley bringing it up. In this way, we were able to improve our pedagogy through participation in a self-study, as Bullock and Ritter (2011) and Hamilton (2019) suggested. All of this occurred during a pandemic where we looked at our teaching practices

"with a view to transforming our practice and redefining education" (Berry & Kitchen, 2020, p. 123). Finally, we were able to deeply reflect on our teaching through both personal reflection and conversation during our meetings. This aligns with Brownell and Tanner (2017) who discussed that the time needed to reflect upon teaching is a barrier to pedagogical change. Our study allowed the time to reflect, even if it was a struggle to always set aside enough time, as Dr. Price-Williams discussed in one of our early meetings.

The second research question was "In what ways might the pressures of scholarship be merged with teaching responsibilities at a regional comprehensive institution during a global pandemic?" As Bullock and Ritter (2011) discussed, faculty research expectations impact their self-value as teachers. Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley (2022) were able to gain a great deal of learning from their previous self-study project, but also had the project realized into a scholarship artifact that will assist them in their path to tenure. As we discussed earlier, we entered this project as an opportunity to merge teaching growth with progress toward scholarship expectations for tenure. Although the process was not always easy, we were able to come away with a project of which we can be proud.

The third research question was "How can relationships be strengthened throughout a self-study process among four faculty members in the same department during a global pandemic?" This self-study allowed Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley to extend their self-study into a second year and bring in two additional individuals. In a department of our size (roughly 24 members), having 1/6 of them in this project allowed us to build trust, offer feedback, and demonstrate relationships that valued challenge and support. As faculty members evaluate their satisfaction with their current institution, faculty colleague relationships play an important factor (Pifer et al., 2019). Additionally, tenure-track faculty members are encouraged to develop strong

collegial relationships (Haviland et al., 2017; Solem & Foote, 2004), which the self-study allowed us to work towards. Dr. Schmid wrote in his original expectations of the group to value the relationships and process equally, an expectation that was achieved.

Pedagogical Practices during a Global Pandemic

Although a full description of all practices is not possible, we wanted to provide a list of the varying pedagogical skills we learned and implemented teaching online or hybrid during a global pandemic. We provide them here for consideration to employ in your practice:

- Setting camera discussions / expectations for Zoom early in the semester
- Coming out of breakout rooms with medals for first, second, and third person back to the room
- Using spotlight to highlight speakers and presenters
- Stating that you want to hear from X# of students before moving on
- Providing musical interludes at breaktimes
- Use of a smartphone walkie talkie application, such as Voxer, for in-class and out-of-class communication
- Using GIFs on slides to engage the students
- Using polling function in Zoom
- Using a central I-pad in class for hybrid classes so that there was one central speaker / microphone
- Using Google Sheets to collect information from students in real time during class
- Tying the lecture into the actual discussion – each slide had an opportunity for engagement with the material

- 1 / 2 / 3 strategy - pose a question that is controversial and take a stance. Get ready to type your quick response in the Zoom chat, with a poll created ahead of time.
- Having questions for students in Zoom breakout rooms – list created ahead of time
- Unsharing a PowerPoint during discussion to help in having more individuals on screen and participating
- Framing questions differently for different students in your class

Recommendations for Undertaking a Self-Study

There are several recommendations that we have for groups who wish to engage in self-study. First, participants need to be able to set aside time for reflection, as this is an important part of self-study, and one that some of our group members struggled with in the beginning. Second, setting standard questions to reflect on each week would provide richer data. Dr. Anderson mentioned this as integral to future studies to streamline the data collection and analysis process. Third, getting into a preplanned schedule for observations is important to start right away. A preplanned schedule puts it into participants' calendars and maximizes the chance they will happen. Fourth, wait until the second year of teaching to be involved in a self-study. One of our participants was in her first year at our institution, and if she did not have prior teaching experience, she felt that she would have been floundering. Fifth, examine bringing in people from different disciplines. Reflections and observations could then focus on pedagogy and how they are teaching, as opposed to the content of the class. Finally, enjoy the collegiality that ensues from such a project. Every single one of us wrote that was the best element of this self-study.

Plans for the Future

Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley have been in a self-study for 2 straight years. All are taking a year off with possible plans to revisit this once we have all promoted from Assistant to Associate Professor rank. Additionally, Dr. Schmid would like to complete a multi-institutional self-study with video observations, but all in the same field, to observe similarities and differences with like colleagues. However, the largest plan is to continue enjoying the connections we have all made through this self-study.

Conclusion

This self-study allowed us to form close relationships, learn about our pedagogical process, discuss the tenure and promotion process, and learn from one another. Student engagement, the impacts of COVID-19, our role as pretenure faculty members, and the role that observation plays in our lives was center stage during this year-long endeavor. It also offered the opportunity for Dr. Schmid and Dr. Townsley to review 2 straight years of self-study research and their experiences. We look forward to our future self-study experiences and where they take us.

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