

## The Other Side of the Coin: A Self-Study of Graduate Student Exposure to International Experiences of Inclusion

Melissa Fleishman  
*Brock University*

This article presents a retrospective understanding of self-study by re-living a study abroad experience through critical reflection. It will explain and clarify how reflection and self-study of the personal experiences of a graduate student can enhance the meaning of inclusion. This paper begins with a brief conceptualization of self-study, introduces the details of an international study abroad experience, and then systematically explores three distinct phases in the reflective process. The aim is to clarify and explain the value and importance of self-study for graduate students by demonstrating its application. While one side of the coin represents those educators who encourage the reflection process, the other side of the coin represents those students experiencing self-study.

Educators often seek innovative teaching methods to foster learning. With graduate student instruction, it often is a coin toss with respect to how to deeply enhance their professional knowledge, skills and dispositions. Reflection is a vehicle to encourage an understanding of self-study. This article will demonstrate the value of self-study by exploring its application through a particular graduate student experience. Detailed reflections in the form of specialized course assignments: a philosophy of inclusion, reflective journals and a culminating task are analyzed. Self-study applicability for graduate students' growth as scholars and professionals in the field of disability studies in education are then formulated. Accordingly, it is necessary to conceptualize a framework of self-study.

### Self-Study

Self-study can be conceptualized as an emerging field of inquiry that encourages reflection on powerful experiences that influence professional development. Its origins are in a special interest group founded in 1993 entitled, The Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998). This special interest group has developed self-study into an innovative method of inquiry that is highly qualitative in nature, dynamic, interactive and derived mainly from post-modern theory (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; LaBoskey, 2004). The aim of self-study is to further understand a deeply personal engagement with a practical experience that leads to and fosters change in knowledge and a way of being in the world (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; LaBoskey, 2004). It is mainly based on self-reflection and it is influenced by a collaborative effort among colleagues and the interrogation of knowledge that occurs amongst them (LaBoskey, 2004). This integration results in negotiations about knowledge, roles and relationships

within an academic context (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Overall, it is about being heard that these personal experiences are shared to foster growth in others (Zeichner, 1998, as cited in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Self-study is a reflection on personal events that are grounded in public history and policy (Mills, 1959, as cited in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). This conceptualization emerges from an exploration of texts, research and documents driven by self-study. As a form of professional development, self-study in education is focused specifically on the multi-directional relationship between teachers, educators and students (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, as cited in LaBoskey, 2004; Kitchen, Parker, & Gallagher, 2008; Samaras, Hicks, & Berger, 2004). It is situated in action research in the field of education (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; LaBoskey, 2004). Over the course of the past decade and a half, self-study's application and presence in programs outside of education appears to be sparse. Despite its scarcity, it has the potential to benefit even the most inexperienced students of education, and can offer much depth and understanding to graduate student experiences.

An integral aspect of the self-study process includes reflective practices. How else are students to bridge the gap between the practical experiences they engage in and the theoretical underpinnings that reform their previous ways of thinking (Schön, 1987)? Encouragement and a strategic educational push are often necessary to come to an understanding of these experiences because they do not present themselves systematically (Schön, 1987). Reflection is heavily influenced by collaborative voice. Schön (1987) captures the essence and importance of inclusion in reflection when he states: "Those who hold conflicting frames pay attention to different facts and make different sense of the facts they notice" (p. 5). Essentially, as participants in any educational field we all have the potential to offer something diverse and that is what makes us a cohesive whole. It was here, in

this virtual world, knowing this valuable piece of information that encouraged my unforgettable journey abroad.

### **The Emergence of Self-Study: Learning Abroad in Belgium**

I am an advocate of inclusive practices in education – those practices that provide the same opportunities to all individuals. As an Applied Disability Studies graduate student with a background in Physical Education, I believe strongly in the notion that educators live amongst everyone. I believe in the value that everyone offers something that another individual can learn. There are both formal educators who teach in classrooms and informal educators whose students are those who happen to cross their informal educational paths. My background studying Physical Education has largely been focused on the physical body. More recently in my graduate work, I have identified the value of an educational thread running through my inclusive practices. At a pivotal moment when I was seeking direction in my graduate education and to challenge the current perspectives I held, I was offered an opportunity to embark on a trip across the world to Ghent, Belgium. I was honored to have been chosen along side with four colleagues to work collaboratively and interrogate our positions on Disability Studies in Education.

### **Preparation for the Coin Toss**

Prior to departure I participated in a graduate seminar facilitated by Dr. Tiffany Gallagher and Dr. Sheila Bennett in the Faculty of Education, Brock University. The diversity amongst the five graduate candidates was staggering. We held distinct perspectives on higher education, physical education, child and youth studies, disability studies, and history. What better place to start facilitating inclusive practices than amongst a group of idiosyncratic graduate students? During these specialized weekly discussions, I was able to explore issues of disability rights, inclusion, and diversity. Although I was unaware of it at the time, my professors were already laying the foundation from which self-study would emerge. The educational framework of self-study was made implicit and strategically embedded in the experience based on the structure of the program. The first step in our self-study experience was to acknowledge a theoretical framework. I was encouraged to reflect on my current ideological position on inclusion. The objective of this first exposure to the realities of my current position was to:

. . . complete a description of your philosophy on what you think inclusion is in 1000 words or less. You will want to both reflect on your past

experiences and also make connections to your future profession/practice/leadership. (EDUC 5P24 course syllabus, 2010)

Reflecting on this project description reminds me of the implicit beginning of my self-study. Initially, I had interpreted the assignment as just another fulfillment of course requirements, and yet acknowledging my philosophy at the out-set laid the foundation from which all of my subsequent experiences as an inclusive educator would be built. This assignment marked the beginning of my journey. An important personal reflection to recall from this assignment was that of the concluding statement in my philosophy of inclusion:

Essentially, my philosophy of inclusion is parallel to the idea of being a life-long learner. I am an advocate of a continual effort to maintain a sense of awareness, and curiosity in education. I have the same expectations about learning, as I do about maintaining inclusive practices because to me, they are one in the same. (Melissa, Reflection, February 10, 2010)

It was not the statement alone that was meaningful but in combination with the feedback I received from my professors, it was my first exposure to the practice of self-study. In response to this concluding piece, my professor wrote: “Nice parallel to the life-long learner-this is consistent with your position of inclusion as a process” (T. Gallagher, personal communication, February 20, 2010). It appears that I was already embracing the nature of self-study as a dynamic field of inquiry (LaBoskey, 2004). I had already developed a strong focal point from which my future experience would project: that of life-long learning.

This element of learning throughout one’s lifetime emphasizes the dynamic nature of self-study and how a person’s knowledge is always changing (Samaras et al., 2004). A key aspect of self-study is that answers to questions are not a destination but a starting point for continual learning and adaptation (LaBoskey, 2004). It is important to seek answers to pressing questions, but most important is the continuous development of questions that lead to practices of change. Another important feature of this initial experience was that my professors had created a supportive environment from which an open dialogue was facilitated (Kitchen et al., 2008; LaBoskey, 2004). I have learnt that this too is ideal when implementing self-study. Through open dialogue I was able to interrogate my current position on inclusion and place it next to that of my colleagues.

In addition to reflecting on my ideological positioning, during the preparation phase of my self-study experience I was encouraged to keep a journal documenting my thoughts. This learning journal was

developed to assist in the reflective learning process. I took great pride in developing all of the course suggestions into a comprehensive learning journal template (see Appendix A). This template was one of my most useful and important items for my travels because it facilitated all of my reflective thought. The usefulness of this journal template is demonstrated in a specific excerpt from my pre-departure journal, "I feel a little torn because it's as though I'm already separating from here, but haven't yet landed anywhere else" (Melissa, Reflection, April 22, 2010). This statement captures the essence of cognitive dissonance that I was feeling, and this was facilitated by the journal template. An analysis of the reflection suggests I was experiencing tension between my cognitive and literal position pre-departure and the position that I would adopt post-departure (Festinger, 1957). Although because of the successful preparation I had pre-departure, I anticipated the dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This emphasizes the importance of cognitive dissonance in educational contexts. It aims to expand current knowledge and beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance allows one to successfully re-position themselves in every new educational context that they are exposed. I knew I was being completely removed from my academic and educational security, and embracing this was preparing me for change (Festinger, 1957; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998). Change in location. Change in perspective. Change in life.

### **Immersion on the Head of the Coin**

My first exposure to the realities of my discomfort of change occurred immediately on the plane departure. I wrote in my learning journal, "I expected to sit with my peers but was awakened to the reality of this trip primarily being an independent experience when were seated sporadically" (Melissa, Reflection, April 24, 2010). This statement about my physical location reflects my cognitive location and my state of my mind at the time. I was turned upside down on my head. I felt scattered, overwhelmed with change and again distanced from the safety of familiarity. Although this discomfort was present, embracing it was the beginning of embracing my self-study experience. Once moving beyond my discomforts, I began critically analyzing my environment. I distinctly remember re-positioning outside of myself and imagining the discomforts I would be experiencing if I had a physical disability. There were many elements in the airport that discomforted me: the lighting, the volume, the visuals, and the washrooms. Although I was able to access all the space I was hypothetically denying myself access to, it remained disconcerting. I specifically wrote in my learning journal, "The sign displayed in the departure line indicated only one bag of luggage and must be able

to place it unattended above your head, if I had a physical disability what would my options be" (Melissa, Reflection, April 24, 2010)? I was purposefully positioning myself critically. I was engaging in a process of reflection in action (Schön, 1987). During the preparation phase of the study abroad experience I sought specialized knowledge about disability and inclusion that was applied in this specific context (Schön, 1987). I engaged in a stop-and-think (Arendt, 1971, as cited in Schön, 1987). I was exposed to a familiar territory and yet my reflective process made the territory seem unfamiliar (Patton, 2002). Although this experience did not directly affect my actions, it was an initial re-positioning of my philosophy of inclusion (Schön, 1987).

After arriving in Belgium, I recall making a critical observation in an information centre in the heart of Ghent. Upon entering the centre, I saw a sign and my first instinct was to consider it as an inclusive gesture, but as I thought more closely about the issue I came to the realization:

Initially, I thought that the sign that said 'welkom' [welcome] with an image of a person in a wheelchair accompanied by a dog was inclusive, but after thinking more critically I realized there shouldn't be need to explicitly welcome a particular group, shouldn't it be assumed everyone is welcome? (Melissa, Reflection, April 24, 2010)

It was evident that my preparation pre-departure was heavily influencing my critical lens during my experiences abroad. I was again working systematically from a reflection in action framework (Schön, 1987). I was not accepting anything just as it was, but interrogating it further to seek a better understanding. A pattern of reflection became apparent after an analysis of my experiences pre-departure and upon my initial arrival into foreign territory. I began each new phase of my travels with an open mind and when I was exposed to an event that was powerful I reflected on the observation, interrogated it based upon my ideological beliefs, and stored the knowledge. This pattern of repetition became a cycle from which I was able to accumulate more value from my experience.

This pattern was consistent with another journal entry I made declaring my natural instinct to ask questions and further interrogate everything that I was seeing and doing, "My opinions have become so critical, I cannot seem to accept information anymore, I'm always critiquing" (Melissa, Reflection, May 30, 2010). This may indicate that the environment I was in and the framework I was approaching it with were allowing me to identify critical areas of concern because, as Mezirow (1998) indicates, "critical self-reflection of an assumption involves critique of a

premise upon which the learner has defined a problem” (p. 186). This critical reflection is valuable because it can facilitate social and personal transformation (Mezirow, 1998). This is exactly the value of my self-reflection while abroad, that it was a means to change and challenge my socio-cultural position.

The pattern of reflection in each new phase of my travels continued to repeat itself. As I engaged in new experiences in Ghent, I sought to experience them both in action and through reflection (Schön, 1987). I did not simply participate in the activities but reflected on the underlying objective of them as I was immersed in them. For instance, our group was informed we would be watching a film on the anti-psychiatry movement which was the socio-cultural shift from institutionalization of persons with psychiatric disorders to deinstitutionalization of individuals and into the community. In preparation, I explored my expectations of the experience. I wrote in my journal, “I expect I will enjoy watching the film, and that it will evoke a lot of thought about why I am here, why I truly at this point in my life have embarked on this trip” (Melissa, Reflection, April 29, 2010). This reflection helped me actively participate in my experiences and was largely facilitated by the use of my learning journal. This experience was an opportune moment for me to have an open dialogue (Kitchen, et al., 2008; LaBoskey, 2004; Schön, 1987). I fully embraced this opportunity and my reflective processes during the experience were valuable. Once the students had watched the film, we were broken off into smaller groups to facilitate discussion. I remember feeling included. It was a powerful moment for me because as a minority in a classroom full of Belgian students I could have been overwhelmed and marginalized. My experience was the exact opposite I wrote in my journal, “How I felt sharing my opinions about the film . . . very respected and supported. I felt my insight was appreciated” (Melissa, Reflection, April 29, 2010). This reflection considers the role of power and emphasizes “expert” knowledge (Goodley & Van Hove, 2005). Who possesses expert knowledge (Goodley & Van Hove, 2005)? The relationship between those that are marginalized, and those that advocate with and for them is threaded throughout this journal entry (Goodley & Van Hove, 2005). My political eye was scanning without me entirely being aware of its influence. Positioning myself as a minority in a dominant culture full of a foreign language, processes and actions, I felt I had truly captured my understanding of inclusion. Inclusion is living and breathing the inclusive practices that you advocate.

Although it appears from analyzing my reflective journal entries that I had finally reached a state of belonging, the next statement indicates otherwise. My journal reads, “I have to admit I am yearning for more

structured, academic environment” (Melissa, Reflection, May 20, 2010). It is evident by this statement that my defensiveness to my educational experiences abroad was again as a result of my cognitive dissonance (Lefrancois, 2000). Despite having previously embraced and come to a place of acceptance throughout my experience, I circled back to this space of discomfort. I was again shifting my understanding and knowledge. It appears as though I was once again preparing for re-immersion into a world that had not changed and yet had completely changed. I believe I was beginning to see the world from the other side of the coin.

### **Re-Immersion on the Tail of the Coin**

Once I arrived back into my routine and my environment back home in Canada I was most certainly changed. A reflection of this change was heavily influenced by my responsibility to create a culminating activity of my experience as a course requirement. Specifically the criteria for this reflective assignment were: “describe your experience during your internship and articulate your learning from the course related activities” (EDUC 5P96 course syllabus, 2010). It was open to interpretation, independent, and fostered creative application. During my time abroad I was engaged in this creative process. Everywhere I went and at every moment I felt something powerful, I took a series of photographs representing the physical body. I gathered this collection of images and photographs, examined them from various perspectives, and then located an overarching theme. The theme that emerged from all of the photos as well as my learning journal was a feeling of being scattered. A salient illustration of this feeling was that at one point during the trip abroad I was paying rent in three different geographical locations in the world: St. Catharines, Ontario; St. Amansberg, Belgium; and Dublin, Ireland. These feelings of being scattered or disembodied emerged in my reflections and contributed to the development of my culminating activity. To visually represent this I cut the photographs into various pieces and artistically re-constructed them as a whole (see Appendix B.). Although I took pieces to make a cohesive whole, I began to understand that the closer I came to a new construction of my reality, the more questions I began to ask. This re-iterated the nature of my experience being guided by self-study: as I began to reach conclusions, I was situated back into de-construction (LaBoskey, 2004). I specifically asked:

Are physical, postural and bodily expressions a universal language, can bodily expression transcend through the exclusive barriers of

language, if our bodies cannot access physical locations, how can they be expected to access important theoretical and abstract locations? (Melissa, Reflection, August 3, 2010)

It appears that at the outset I began situating myself from my Physical Education framework, challenged it while abroad and re-visited my framework with a critical lens upon arrival. I was able to provoke my educational insecurities, challenge my assumptions and illuminate the value of self-study for graduate student growth (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). I underwent a circular self-study experience, landing back where I had started and yet arriving not at all where I had begun the course of my trip.

### The Relevance of Self-Study

Undertaking a critical analysis of my philosophy of inclusion, learning journals and culminating activity has allowed me to re-live my study abroad experience. Re-living this experience has allowed me to clearly see the value of self-study in my graduate work. I was expected to accept a shift in the construction of my world and learn that it most certainly was not the only way of interpreting the world. As Gallagher, DiGiorgio, Bennett, and Antle (2008) founders of this particular study abroad project declared: "this project may also afford graduate students who are practicing educators to critically analyze how inclusion can be improved through professional learning" (p. 34). It did this and more: it changed my perspective, my research, and my relationships. The benefits this program provided me continue to emerge as I reflect and interact with the experiences I had while I was abroad. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity and believe that programs such as this need to continue to be developed.

As for my colleagues, they too underwent changes, re-positioning of their values, and beliefs on issues related to inclusion which were reflected upon during their culminating presentations. However, I believe the true value of international exchanges of a group of diverse individuals is that although they are situated in the same country, city and town, they all arrive back home with different currency. What I learned from the experience was very different from that of my roommate in Belgium which varied greatly from other colleagues in the group. It is this diverse level of experience that continues to add depth and complexity to the value of international exchanges.

Programs that include a study abroad allow graduate students to be taken out of the traditional learning space and immersed into novel experiences. This is a potentially valuable experience for any graduate student to undertake. In order for any graduate student to expand their knowledge, they must challenge

their current knowledge. I realized learning this, and sharing this with others is vital for effective educational growth. Having been exposed to different methods of instruction, I learned that teaching does not have to be rigid or tedious it can be innovative and creative. This is significant not only to the field of Disability Studies in Education but in any field that learning processes occur. Ideally, all graduate programs could benefit from such international, reflective experiences as the emphasis is on personal growth. Any program could implement a practical experience that encourages students to situate themselves in contexts they have yet to experience. This would contribute to the diversity in many programs, influence inclusive practices and the necessity to work collaboratively.

Graduate students need to be challenged. They need to engage with academic material from entirely new perspectives so that they can develop into contributors of academia. Self-study ensures that this happens. Self-study in education is not limited to students, professors in other disciplines might adopt this line of inquiry and realize positive contributions to their respective fields. It is necessary to expand academia and discourage singular, narrow thinking. Studying abroad experiences can facilitate critical reflection and cognitive dissonance that foster innovative thinking. It is this innovative thinking that can contribute to the field of education as an ever-changing and adaptive field of inquiry. Heads or tails, it is evident that the value of self-study is not limited to those that facilitate it but that the value extends far beyond to the students that are actively engaging in the process.

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MELISSA FLEISHMAN is an enthusiastic advocate of inclusion. This is evident in her collaborative team effort amongst her colleagues, her Teaching Assistant practices at Brock University, and her exploration of inclusion in her Master of Arts in Applied Disability Studies. Melissa's current research interests extend beyond inclusion of individuals with disabilities and aims to study inclusion amongst professionals who facilitate inclusive teaching environments for students

with disabilities. It is her hope that graduate-level educational environments will progress from traditional practices and continue to foster creative opportunities for learning. As a second year Master's student she continues to seek these opportunities for both academic and personal growth.

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Appendix A  
A reflective learning journal template to facilitate theoretical re-positioning.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Learning Journal # \_\_\_\_\_

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- **Goal:** \_\_\_\_\_

- **Recorded observations:**

What I thought it would be? (i.e., see, hear)	What did I like?	What might I change?	What did I not see that might have been . . .	What ways same/different then Canada?

Appendix B

Scattered pieces of photographs from the Belgian community, artistically re-constructed into a representation of the body – where or how does your body fit?

