

Nishida, M. (2022). Standing between two cultures: A hybrid educator's self-study of a critical friendship with the Japanese teacher education community. I: K. Smith (Red.), *Inquiry as a bridge in teaching and teacher education. NAFOL 2022* (p. 143–160). Fagbokforlaget.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55669/oa120407>

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Standing between two cultures: A hybrid educator's self-study of a critical friendship with the Japanese teacher education community

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ABSTRACT

In the context of translating the English *Self-Study Teacher Research* (SSTR) (Samaras, 2011) textbook into Japanese, I tried to support my Japanese colleagues' endeavor as their critical friend. However, I faced a dilemma between my role as their advisor and my real identity as a Japanese doctoral student and self-study researcher living in Iceland. The purpose of this self-study was to investigate what factors hindered or inspired my critical friendship with Japanese teacher educators and in-service teachers. The aim was to understand how my hybridity between Japan and Iceland could empower me to bring methodological diversity to a Japanese teacher education research community. A concept of critical friendship frames the study. Inspired by the volcanic landscape of Iceland, I used the metaphor of "a gap" to explore my mental gap between how I was positioned as advisor and the reality of being only a doctoral student. Upon analysis, I divided my findings into three phases: reality before

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me, beyond the dilemma, and coming to terms with the dilemma. I encourage other educators who are developing self-study communities to begin with their journeys by collaborating with trusted colleagues, such as by studying or translating the SSTR textbook.

Keywords: Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices, critical friendship, metaphor, Japanese teacher educators, hybrid educator

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING SELF-STUDY AS METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

In 1992, a group of teacher educators from Arizona met Fred Korthagen, the Dutch teacher educator with a focus on reflection, at the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) annual meeting. The resulting discussion of the need to transform teacher educators' views and roles developed into the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Special Interest Group (SIG) in 1993 (Loughran, 2004; Samaras, 2011). Since then, self-study has spread across continents to improve teacher educators' practice through self-reflection and collaborative inquiry (Lunenberg et al., 2020; Thomas & Guðjónsdóttir, 2020).

Teaching culture in Japan has been challenged to shift from a traditional knowledge-banking style to student-centered learning. Elsewhere (Nishida, 2020), I have argued that teacher educators in Japan need to become familiar with the idea of practitioner research methodologies, specifically self-study of teacher education practices (hereafter, "self-study"), to support their student teachers' reflective practices. However, bringing methodological diversity into a Japanese teacher educators' research community is a complex undertaking. It requires a great effort for Japanese teacher educators to challenge themselves to transform their traditional values. Most importantly, it should be done through collaboration and mutual respect rather than according to any hierarchy (Kristinsdóttir, et al., 2020).

To introduce self-study into the Japanese teachers' research community, I wondered whether I could support the Japanese teacher educators' learning community as their critical friend. But I faced a dilemma. The purpose of the study was to investigate what factors would hinder or inspire my critical friendship with Japanese teacher educators and in-service teachers when supporting the development of self-study in Japan. The aim was to understand how my hybridity

between Japan and Iceland could be empowering as I brought methodological diversity into a Japanese teacher education research community. To guide the study, I asked: how did my Japanese-Icelandic cultural hybridity empower me as a critical friend to collaborate with my Japanese colleagues?

Following the introduction, I describe my hybrid cultural context between Japan and Iceland, and my encounter with my Japanese colleagues. Next, the conceptual framework of critical friendship is explored to make meaning from my collaboration with my Japanese colleagues. The methodology section explains the self-study methodology and my research strategy. In the findings section, I explore “the gap” between my position as advisor and the reality of being only a doctoral student in answering my research questions. Finally, I discuss the implications for future research.

STANDING BETWEEN TWO CULTURES: JAPAN AND ICELAND

I am a Japanese self-study researcher, an immigrant preschool educator, and a doctoral student in Iceland. I identify as a determined middle-aged female from Osaka, so-called *Osaka-no-obachan* (Osaka aunties) (SturtzSreetharan, 2008). Before I moved to Iceland in 2008, I was educated in Japan and worked there as an educator for about six years. In 2009, I began my master's studies at the University of Iceland, where I learned the Icelandic value of inclusion (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2020). When I began my doctoral studies in 2014, I learned to use self-study to investigate my practice at an Icelandic preschool for the purpose of my professional development. My doctoral supervisor Hafdís, whom I first met at the beginning of my master's program, has supported my endeavor in a new country as my critical friend. My way of collaborating other people is influenced by her attitude.

My teaching values initially reflected the teacher-centered nature of the Japanese education system in which I was raised and trained as an educator. While Icelandic early childhood culture respects children's freedom in their play (Einarsdóttir, 2006), I tried to keep Icelandic children under control. I was confused about why this did not work. These cultural differences triggered my professional identity crisis in October 2014, only two months after I began my professional career (Nishida, 2021). My confidence in taking on this new professional challenge had been lost. While I understood the value of respecting children's play in theory, what I was doing in practice was the opposite. Hafdís encouraged me to begin my self-study to improve my practice. A process of

reflection and collaborative inquiry enabled me to better understand what I was doing and how I could deal with my crisis. Through self-study, I developed my own pedagogical strategy that blended positive aspects of both Japanese and Icelandic education cultures. However, it took me several years to feel that my study “made sense” to me.

The turning point of my experience with self-study was in 2018, when I had an opportunity to investigate the self-study movement in Japan and to contribute to the 2nd *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teacher and Teacher Education Practices* (the handbook) (Kitchen et al., 2020). During my investigation, I interviewed Nobuko Takeda, a former university professor and the leading editor of John Loughran’s work into Japanese (Takeda et al., 2019). She connected me to Professor Kazuhiro Kusahara at Hiroshima University, who has invited international self-study researchers to visit several times since 2015. These two Japanese professors shared with me their passion for improving the Japanese teacher education system and their interest in introducing self-study to the Japanese teacher education community (Nishida, 2020). Writing my research results for the handbook inspired me not only to develop my understanding of self-study, but also to make a strong connection to the Japanese teacher education community. I was excited for the chance to collaborate with teacher educators in Japan.

CONCEPTUALLY FRAMING THE STUDY: CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP

In my self-study, I understand my cultural hybridity between Japan and Iceland as a status or resource that emerges from combining the cultures of Japan and Iceland (Bhabha, 1994). In this respect, my roles in collaboration with my Japanese colleagues could be explored through a frame of critical friendship supported by cultural mediation.

Despite the name, self-study researchers always invite others, so-called critical friend(s), to their research to provide a different perspective through collaborative inquiry and help validate the trustworthiness of a study (Samaras, 2011). Costa and Kallick (1993) defined a critical friend as a “trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend” (p. 50). In critical friendship, there is no hierarchy between a researcher and a critical friend. Everyone who takes part in a self-study can learn from their own experiences throughout the research process. Not only does the self-study researcher receive constructive

support, but the critical friend can also gain new perspectives on their own practice through collaborative experiences (Schuck & Russell, 2005). The term *friend* implies a close and casual relationship, but the friendship in self-study is based upon a sense of professionalism. Critical friendship provides a mutual learning experience beneficial to all participants.

To support my Japanese colleagues as a critical friend, I use my hybrid resources in our collaboration. In particular, my language skills in Japanese and English, and understanding of Japanese and Western culture, provide significant advantages in my collaboration. When mediating intercultural communication, Vygotsky's idea of cultural mediation (Lake, 2012) inspires my critical friendship role. A cultural mediator is "a person who facilitates communication, understanding, and action between persons or groups who differ with respect to language and culture" (Taft, 1981, as cited in Katan, 1999, p. 12). In the context of translating between languages, the role of cultural mediator might include not only the knowledge of a language, but also the culture in which the language is spoken. Therefore, I am a critical friend to my Japanese colleagues, which includes the role of the cultural mediator between Japan and the self-study community.

SELF-STUDY AS METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The methodological section describes the methodological diversity of this self-study and the creative methods I used to conduct it.

Self-study, my strategy for finding who I am

Self-study of teacher education practices, or so-called self-study, is a methodology for studying a researcher's own "professional practice settings" (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014, p. 156) to improve their practice through reflection. Loughran and Northfield (1998) explained that reflection is "a personal process of thinking, refining, reframing and developing action" (p. 15). Reflection is the fundamental method of self-study.

Self-study incorporates a variety of traditional qualitative methods, such as narrative inquiry and arts-based methods, to develop a personal/critical friend inquiry into a qualitative study with creativity and flexibility (Samaras, 2011; Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020). Researchers are challenged to step outside of their comfort zone and to explore their own personal inquiry through various inventive methods (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2020). Hamilton and Pinnegar

(2014) called self-study “intimate scholarship” (p. 153) because methods used in research inspire the researcher to explore their own vulnerability and passion for education by reflecting on their professional learning experiences through collaborative inquiry.

I chose self-study research methods to “examine more closely the context for the study, the choices for data collection, and the processes used for analysis of data that inform the self-study” (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020, p. 379). Although I am Japanese and the foundation of my professional identity was initially built on working as an educator in Japan, I developed my academic resources in Iceland. I try to be creative and flexible in balancing my professional and academic resources.

Self-Study Teacher Research textbook translation project

Self-Study Teacher Research (“the SSTR textbook”) (Samaras, 2011) is a comprehensive textbook for teachers or anyone striving to improve their practice to learn about self-study systematically yet wholeheartedly. For the development of a self-study culture, the textbook has contributed greatly through two editions. The SSTR textbook introduces the methodological components of self-study with practical examples. Exemplars such as timeline and various methods help them plan their self-study research comfortably. The author of the textbook, Anastasia Samaras, also points to her personal communication and messages from other self-study researchers around the world as a fundamental step toward developing a professional learning community. The SSTR textbook intrigues readers with a wholehearted approach to initiate their self-study journey. As a novice self-study researcher, the SSTR textbook guided me in developing the theoretical and methodological foundation to conduct my self-study of my own practice at an Icelandic preschool.

While most self-study literature is written in English, my Japanese colleagues felt the need to make it accessible to Japanese speakers. Bringing foreign concepts into their culture seems to be a common challenge for the international self-study community (Kristinsdóttir et al., 2020; Lunenberg et al., 2020; Shin & Im, 2020). One self-study format does not fit all because every country has educational values unique to their contexts. The first researchers who try to introduce self-study to their country must be strategic while respecting their own cultural characteristics. The original text of SSTR is written in English and has been translated into Korean (Shin & Im, 2020). I believed that the SSTR textbook

would be the ideal source for my Japanese colleagues because my methodological knowledge was built on this book. Translating the textbook could be a starting point for my Japanese colleagues to learn about self-study together.

Soon after I introduced the SSTR textbook to my Japanese colleague Nobuko in autumn 2019, she organized a small group of five to read through it. I joined their group in March 2020. The group has invited more teacher educators and in-service teachers to translate it in September 2020. The SSTR translation project began with 19 participants.

Participants

Since this SSTR project is ongoing in January 2022, my research for this study focuses on September 2020–March 2021. And since this is a self-study, I am the center of the study, but members from the SSTR project are involved as participants. The members of the SSTR project gathered in response to the invitation letter Nobuko Takeda sent in September 2020 to potential educators who might be interested in self-study. Besides me, there were 12 university-based teacher educators from different universities, four in-service teachers, and two doctoral students gathered from across Japan. Our working environment, title, experience, expertise, age, and gender vary, but we are all passionate about gaining new learning experiences and effecting educational change through self-study. I asked all members their permission to include them this study. Due to the nature of this study, all the personal names appear in the study are intentionally kept as they are, with participants' permission.

Data collection

In exploring my personal inquiry into the critical friendship with my Japanese colleagues, my reflective journal is my main data source. In this self-study, my reflective journal performed multiple functions including logging my activities and conversation with colleagues and sparking reflection on my thoughts (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020). The quotes presented here were retrieved from my reflective journal. I also investigated other supporting data, including word documents and Facebook messages shared and exchanged among members. The presentation slides shared by Nobuko during our recent meeting on December 28, 2021, described the history and development of the SSTR project. They were used as a member-check reference. These additional data are intended to validate my quotes and enhance trustworthiness of my personal/critical friend inquiries (Samaras, 2011).

In the beginning of the SSTR project, we discussed opportunities for using our collective data for our future self-studies. I wanted all participants to consider doing their own self-studies from this project experience, as Samaras (2011) encouraged us to “get your hands dirty” by “muddying up our hands, making mistakes, and enjoying the process of learning and coming to know the world through our engagement in it” (p. xiii). Therefore, I encouraged my colleagues to retain our collective data.

The project has been conducted in Japanese and all the documents, including my reflective journal, are kept in Japanese. I translated them into English as they became part of this study.

Data analysis

Data analysis is a challenging yet enchanting process for me in my self-study. Pithouse-Morgan and Samaras (2020) have called for researchers to be open and inventive in conducting and writing self-studies. Since every experience and focus is unique, I challenge myself to be inventive in analyzing and writing up my data. In doing so, I used a concept of a *gap* as my metaphorical prompt.

The rationale for using the word *gap* is twofold. First, the *gap* refers to the dilemma of the distance between reality and aspiration I embrace when collaborating with the Japanese colleagues. Second, it is a metaphoric inspiration based on the natural landscape of Iceland, which is a volcanic island where people literally live on the lava field. Rivers of magma flooded the surface of the island and formed mystical landscapes. Crevasses we see from the surface of the lava field may be deep, and light may not reach to the bottom. When Icelanders explore lava fields in groups, we sometimes hold hands to ensure the no member of the group falls into a crevasse. Similarly, if I fell in the *gap* between my aspiration and reality alone, I would have to climb up by myself. However, should I walk with someone, such as critical friends, they could support me and keep me from falling. The distinctive geology of Iceland inspires my way of expressing struggles through metaphors, and the narrative invites readers to capture complexities and subtle meanings behind experiences (Nishida, 2021).

A concept map (Samaras, 2011) was my analytic strategy for organizing my thinking, reflecting on my findings, analyzing factors around findings, and expanding discussion with Hafdís. Since the purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that influenced my critical friendship with my Japanese colleagues, I first put “my position in Japan” in the center of the concept map.

I then connected it to my “cultural hybrid identity.” While exploring my thoughts through concept mapping, some key terms such as struggle, balance, responsibility, pressure, and awareness appeared. I read back my reflective journal to retrieve my quotes related to these key terms. These pieces of quotes inspired me to write my experience as a narrative which enabled me to visualize the gap between my current reality and my aspirations.

While reflecting on my experiences in Iceland, I realized that the attitude that Icelandic self-study researchers show resonates with the concept of egalitarian critical friendship (Kristinsdóttir et al., 2020; Shuck & Russell, 2005). This motivated me to reflect on and embrace my Japanese-Icelandic cultural hybrid resources as my strategy for dealing with cultural differences. The dilemma I was facing has become a catalyst for analyzing the gap between my aspiration of becoming the critical friend and the advisor (Berry, 2008). This reflection enabled me to divide my concept map into three parts representing the development of my understanding of my critical friendship as three phases: the reality before me; beyond the dilemma; and coming to terms with the dilemma.

FINDINGS

Following the data analysis, I explored how my Japanese-Icelandic cultural hybridity empowered me as a critical friend to support or influence my collaboration with my Japanese colleagues. The findings section explains each phase in developing my dilemma of becoming a critical friend.

Phase 1: The reality before me

When I first contacted former university professor Nobuko Takeda in August 2018, I was in the middle of a struggle with my self-study of practice at an Icelandic preschool. I had not made much progress in my self-study since 2014. I was frustrated. It was as though I was stuck in a deep and dark gap on the lava field, without knowing how to climb out. Reading self-study literature, including the SSTR textbook, allowed me to find light, but I needed a stronger light to lead me to the surface. I did not feel like I would deserve to take a task of writing the handbook chapter. However, Nobuko was respectful about my academic experience with self-study. We discussed many different topics around education which encouraged me to write the handbook chapter as a hybrid educator.

Upon completion of the chapter contribution, something sparked inside of me. Through my research about the self-study movement in Japan, I wondered

whether I could support the Japanese teacher educators' learning community as their critical friend. My aspiration became real as Nobuko and Professor Kazuhiro Kusahara invited me, my Icelandic colleague, and Hafdís to symposia on self-study held at their respective universities in June 2019. My understanding of my own self-study has grown over the years, yet I was not fully confident in my theoretical knowledge and practical experience with self-study.

Through the investigation, Nobuko pointed out that I am the first internationally active Japanese self-study researcher. However, as a doctoral student without enough publishing experience, I felt I would not qualify as a role model. My Japanese colleagues' view of me made me uneasy. My real self was a doctoral student who had been struggling with developing her self-study. It was a dilemma, but there was no time for me to explore this dilemma because my Japanese colleagues seemed to be ready to learn *all* about self-study from me. I had to do something. One of the things I began was introducing the SSTR textbook to them.

My Japanese colleague Nobuko has extensive experience translating books about teacher education and self-study. She took immediate action to include her colleagues. Later she organized a group of five to study the SSTR textbook, and then invited me to their bi-weekly online meeting beginning in March 2020. We agreed to translate the textbook into Japanese because we believed that the SSTR textbook would help Japanese teachers and teacher educators learn about self-study systematically. We knew that the translation process would require a lot of work and discussion. Launching a translation project was a great opportunity to involve more teachers and teacher educators who sought ways to change their practice.

My feeling of uneasiness increased when I found that in the invitation letter Nobuko sent to recruit potential members my position was indicated as *advisor*. In Japanese, professional titles are an important part of a person's professional identity, and to me, the term advisor implies a sense of hierarchy. Considering Japanese culture and history, some level of hierarchy could be respected. However, my Icelandic side was whispering behind my ear that this "advisor" was not me. I told my Japanese colleagues that I wanted to be their critical friend in the beginning, but I had to begin with explaining what critical friendship would mean in self-study.

The invitation letter made me realize that the methodological diversity includes not only self-study as a research methodology, but other concepts associated

with self-study as well. As I expressed in my reflective journal on September 20, 2020, "I wanted to be their critical friend, but I was positioned as their advisor. The concept of critical friend is foreign to the Japanese..." My aspiration of becoming their critical friend should be recognized, but my critical friendship would be much more complex than I imagined. It had to be grown into our kind of critical friendship. The reality before me revealed a mental gap between my aspiration and reality. I thought that I could get out of the gap by completing the handbook chapter, but there was another gap. The next one was much deeper than I thought. There was no light at the moment.

Phase 2: Beyond the dilemma

A dilemma between the way my Japanese colleagues viewed me and the reality of myself as a novice self-study researcher made me struggle in the gap. Once, a young teacher educator from the SSTR project shared with me his feeling that he lacked professional training in self-study. Before we got to know each other, he was already a self-educated self-study researcher of his own practice. I could understand his feeling, and wondered how I could support him. In my journal on October 2, 2020, I reflected on my situation in Iceland: "I had to acquire a feeling of self-study by a sequence of trial and error... I struggled a lot, made mistakes, explored in the labyrinth, then finally began to see the light before me." I had already been through a feeling of incompetence. What would be the difference between his situation and mine?

There was no course about self-study at my university in Iceland when I began my self-study in 2014, but I did receive some support from the Icelandic self-study community that Hafdís has been developing. Hafdís and other Icelandic colleagues in the community are always ready to listen to me. In addition, I began presenting my self-study at international conferences, including AERA. Receiving feedback from other self-study researchers outside of Iceland has been invaluable to my improvement. However, my Japanese colleagues would not have enough opportunity to meet other international researchers. They understand and speak English, but they need the confidence to believe in their ability to use their resources. I was wondering how I would be able provide the same support and encouragement to my Japanese colleagues as I had been receiving from the international self-study community.

Thus, as a part of my support for the SSTR project, I tried to connect my Japanese colleagues to the international self-study community. I first invited

Hafdis to the online meeting with six people to ask general questions about self-study in the beginning of my participation to the project in March 2020. Then I invited Anastasia Samaras, the author of the SSTR textbook, to our online meeting with all project members in August 2020. In leveraging this international network, I tried to motivate my Japanese colleagues to understand their new learning experience in the international context. In addition, I have been in touch with Anastasia throughout the project. During the translation process, we would often encounter some words and concepts that we had a hard time understanding in light of the Japanese educational context. I could often explain, but not always. If we got stuck, I emailed Anastasia to ask her to clarify certain concepts to improve the accuracy of our translation. To my Japanese colleagues, reaching out like this would be a surprise considering their humble culture. It is my Icelandic side that would push me to contact Anastasia or other self-study researchers without any hesitation. Support from Anastasia and other researchers has been essential to maintaining the quality of our translation. Personally, liaising between my Japanese colleagues and the international self-study community has made me learn that being competent in two languages would not mean that I knew how to translate every word related to self-study. It would require that I act as a cultural mediator.

On October 3, 2020, Nobuko and other members from the project invited me to an additional online meeting from the SSTR project to discuss what critical friendship could be like in the Japanese context. Some of project participants had already begun their self-studies, and they wished to develop their understanding to make their self-study successful. In reconciling the concept of self-study with the Japanese cultural context of hierarchy and “doing it correctly,” they understandably had a lot of questions, which inspired me to reflect on my own definition of critical friendship with my Japanese colleagues. Until then, I believed my dilemma was the mental gap between their view and my reality. Perhaps I was the one who jumped into the gap and got myself stuck in the darkness. I should look at my position differently, from my Icelandic cultural perspective. I am a novice self-study researcher, but at least I am aware of who I am through self-study. I am from Osaka, where middle-aged women insert themselves into other people’s business. My nature is supportive of other people’s endeavors, and I learned how to balance my kind of support in the international context, by receiving support from Hafdis and other international self-study researchers. I explored this in the reflective journal I wrote on the night of the discussion:

"I'm an *Osaka-no-Obachan*. If I were positioned as an advisor, it may be OK to be a bit pushy or nosy to other's learning for the purpose of developing a self-study community... My reflection fostered my confidence. I should encourage them to find their own ways of critical friendship by trying themselves. That's also my way of showing critical friendship to the Japanese colleagues."

My reflection made me aware of the fact that I had opportunities to experience and develop my self-study more than my Japanese colleagues. I have stories to share with them from my self-study experience in Iceland. Although I am only a doctoral student, I have been building a good connection with other active self-study researchers abroad, who respect individual experiences and learn from each other. My Japanese colleagues could learn from my experience and that would be the fundamental idea of the self-study methodology. What I needed was confidence to share my stories about mistakes I made, and to use my resources I gained through my academic experience outside of Japan. I wanted to drive home to my Japanese colleagues that we learn by trying ourselves, and find our own definition for our kind of critical friendship. I would be ready to give them a hand should they fall into the gap. To do so, I had to climb up out of the gap and stand on the lava field again.

Phase 3: Coming to terms with the dilemma

As a self-study researcher, I wanted to gain more confidence in myself. But I did not mean to confront my dilemma. Rather, I needed to embrace the reality and come to terms with my dilemma. The gap does not need to be filled. I just need to be aware of it so as not to fall in.

In the beginning of my talk about self-study after my visit to Japan in June 2019, I could sense my Japanese colleagues' enthusiasm about their new learning experience. When I was reflecting on my journal two years later, I noticed that they had shared with me their personal and professional struggles in their practices over time. It was actually a great opportunity for them to begin their own self-studies, but I could not motivate them enough. Around that time, I began to accept my own responsibility as a member of the project team. My journal from November 23, 2020 shows my commitment: "I feel responsible as an editing advisor for introducing the first self-study textbook to the Japanese teacher educators' community."

This was the first time that I described my own position as an advisor in my journal. Until then, I wrote "their project." At some point, I began to call it "our

project” instead. I decided to show my attitude to my colleagues that I have been learning from our SSTR project experience. Even though I was called an advisor, I would act as their critical friend in the way I wanted. By posting short comments on our Facebook group page, I tried to remind them that I would always be there to talk and listen to them. On February 12, 2021, I posted a spontaneous question to the members. There was no response for a while, but after Nobuko responded to me, other people began to respond. Until I first found Nobuko’s response, I was nervous. The next day, I posted, “It actually takes quite a courage for a non-tech-savvy person like me to tweet a trivial question. I assume that there might be quite a few people in the world, not having trusted colleagues to speak with.” I had to take an action instead of waiting for them to come to me.

Writing my thoughts on the Facebook group page was an important step for me to develop my image of critical friendship. My journal on the same day shows my determination that “if I want to make a change, I should keep talking to them, keep questioning their practice, and then I should express my thoughts and learning through my writing.” I learned that I had to show them my own self-study about critical friendship by my writing. It began with the Facebook posts, then extended to an academic work like this to demonstrate how I came to understand our mutual learning experience through my own self-study of practice.

Having struggled in the gap, I learned how to climb out of it by writing about what I was learning. My confidence pushed me go beyond the dilemma I was facing at the beginning of the SSTR project. Now I was starting to feel more comfortable with owning the title of an advisor to support my Japanese colleagues and acting as their critical friend with my own definition as “a culturally hybrid colleague who supports a project by listening and offering critical feedback to colleagues while keeping a balance of humbleness and confidence.”

DISCUSSION – THROUGH A LENS OF A CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP

In this study, I explored how my Japanese-Icelandic cultural hybridity empowered me as a critical friend to support or influence the collaboration with my Japanese colleagues. Reflecting on my thoughts through a critical friend’s lens, my first challenge was to deal with a dilemma between the way they viewed me as their almighty advisor and my own perception of reality as a doctoral student without enough academic experience. I believed that there should not be any hierarchy in critical friendship (Shuck & Russell, 2005). I did not mean to teach

my Japanese colleagues self-study, but as I learned through my experiences in the international self-study community, I tried to be open to discussion and listen to my Japanese colleagues' experiences.

The hindrance I discovered through my dilemma as a catalyst (Berry, 2008) was my own bias or assumption about the Japanese cultural value of hierarchy. My Japanese colleagues called me their advisor, but this was their respectful manner as Japanese. Through the SSTR project, I learned how I could support them by using my Japanese-Icelandic resources. In doing so, I came to understand that my critical friendship could be like a cultural mediator that allowed me to connect my Japanese colleagues with the international self-study community to improve the quality of our translation (Lake, 2021). Being a cultural mediator, I learned that the dilemma does not have to be overcome, and self-study enables me to find my approach to embracing the dilemma and develop my confidence upon dilemma. In doing so, I am empowered by my critical friendship with my Japanese colleagues.

On the other hand, the supportive nature of the Icelandic research culture (Kristinsdóttir et al., 2020) inspired me to explore my dilemma creatively. Metaphoric prompts related to cultural resources sparked me to explore my experiences, and I discovered a way to get beyond the dilemma (Nishida, 2021). Through the metaphor of the gap referring to the Icelandic volcanic landscapes, I could explore my vulnerability intimately (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014). I became respectful of the Japanese cultural value of hierarchy while embracing the fact of being the advisor, and then developed my own definition of critical friendship. My hybrid resources between Japan and Iceland provided me a metaphoric tool to get out of the deep, dark gap.

Finally, the message that the SSTR textbook delivers empowered me with courage. My Japanese colleagues and I try to create our self-study community by collectively "getting our hands dirty" (Samaras, 2011, p. xiii). As a Japanese person, I understand that it is important for Japanese to avoid making mistakes. We all lacked in courage to believe in ourselves – even me. My Japanese colleagues need confidence in their English language proficiency. I need courage to believe in their sense of respect to who I am as a hybrid educator between Japan and Iceland. I learned that we do not have to make the project perfect. The project should be wholehearted.

Every culture takes a different approach to introducing self-study (Kristinsdóttir et al., 2020; Shin & Im, 2020). Our first approach was to develop our own self-study

community by translating the SSTR textbook. To conclude my findings section, I came to define my own critical friendship. Critical friends' support in self-study demands a balance between critical inquiry and respect (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Samaras, 2011). My cultural hybridity between Japan and Iceland enabled me to find the balance. As the author of the SSTR textbook encouraged us through her writing, we are empowered to create the Japanese educators' professional learning community systematically yet wholeheartedly through self-study. We can fall into the gap together. If it really happens, we discuss how to get out of the gap together with mutual support and respect.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-STUDY COMMUNITY

In the beginning of January 2022, our SSTR project is nearing completion. We are doing the final editing to fit our translated text into the textbook page allowance suggested by the Japanese publisher. However, just as our Korean colleagues have begun their self-study journey by translating the SSTR textbook (Shin & Im, 2020), in another sense we are at the starting point of our journey – there is still a need to conduct collaborative self-study with my Japanese colleagues to explicate my dilemma from different perspectives.

For me, I extricated myself from the gap, and am standing on the lava field. January in Iceland is the hardest and darkest season of the year, but I know that spring is coming around the corner. In the summer, the midnight sun illuminates all the gaps. I am not alone as I traverse the lava field. I am ready to invite my Japanese colleagues to join my continuing walk, where I know we can support each other. If I am alone, there is always a chance I could fall into the gap again, but my Japanese colleagues can pull me up with their courage by getting their hands dirty. Once our experience of the SSTR translation project ends, I hope our walk inspires educators all over the world to join our journey towards creating the global learning community through self-study. I especially hope that other educators who are about to develop their self-study community find this article helpful, and that it helps them avoid falling into the gaps on the path ahead of them.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully appreciates Anastasia P. Samaras, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Nobuko Takeda, Kazuhiro Kusahara, and the SSTR project members for their support and contribution to this study.

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