

A CALL TO STUDY AND CONTEMPLATIVE SPACE A THINK PIECE

Overview of the Think Piece

I begin with a brief summary of my involvement in other groups over the course of the last 30 years and offer some reasons why I would consider or not consider them to be study groups. Next, I focus on three significant dimensions that mark my experience of belonging to the Dissertation/Writing Study Group. First, I consider what I mean by the call to study and how belonging to this group has consistently been marked by this invitation. Secondly, I offer some ideas about the deliberative nature of the group and how this is a significant aspect of adult learning for me. Finally, I make the point that the ways that we engage each other in the group represent for me a contemplative space.

Involvement in Other Groups

Over the past 30 years I have belonged to a number of groups that I would now retrospectively refer to as "Study Groups." While they were different in their context and content, the various groups shared a number of common characteristics. Within each group there was an engaging, collaborative and dynamic learning process; there was a range of expertise within the group, but no designated expert or leader, and the sharing of food was often, though not always, important. I also have belonged to a number of other groups over the years. However, in light of what I have come to believe about the nature of study groups I would not characterize them as "Study Groups." This does not suggest that there was no value in belonging to these groups. They simply served other purposes and were marked by different characteristics. For instance, the focus and content of the group was typically determined by external needs. Furthermore, persons in positions of authority usually imposed a set agenda that determined the direction of the group. While it would require further exploration beyond the scope of this think piece to clarify these thoughts, I have found this orientation toward an externally set agenda to be essentially functional and it often has diminished any potential for vibrancy and engaged learning within these groups.

A Call to Study: An Ongoing Invitation

The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) describes "call" as a summons, an invitation, a bidding to something. My experience in the Introduction to Qualitative Research course in the winter of 1996 was such a call for me. I found myself summoned into a learning process that was both compelling and meaningful. Following the experience of participating in this class, I was invited by Noreen Garman and Maria Piantanida to join a Dissertation Study Group. This further call to study provides an ongoing contemplative space that enables me to continue in an authentic learning process. A call is also described as to claim or regard as one's own. Within the study group there is a value placed on self-designed and self-directed learning. This enables me to shape and claim my learning.

This call is an invitation to study that is marked by an authentic engagement in something of significance. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following meanings of the word study. Study is marked by zeal, affection, and painstaking study. It is related to *studere* that means to be zealous, seek to be helpful, and apply oneself. The OED states that in a certain sense of the Latin *studium*, to study refers to affection, friendliness, devotion to another's welfare, desire,

inclination, pleasure or interest felt in something. Additionally, study is viewed as thought or meditation directed to the accomplishment of a purpose. It is marked by deliberative effort or contrivance, and is the object or aim of (a person's) solicitous endeavors. A significant aspect of the study group is the way that we explore in detail not only what is under study but also the manner in which we are engaging in the study. Within this call to study is the commitment to seek to become minutely acquainted with or to understand a phenomenon, a problematic, or a dimension of practice.

Discursive Deliberation as a Significant Aspect of Adult Learning

Through rich conversations, consistent interaction and critique by members of the Study Group I am intellectually engaged and experience a range of challenges that are interesting and exciting. This deliberative process demands that I question my assumptions and avoid naive and simplistic renderings of complex issues. My ideas are expanded and shaped out of the dialogic nature of the relationships within the Study Group. In a think piece entitled, "What Do I Mean by 'Discourse,'" Noreen Garman (1996) suggests that when she thinks of "the notion of discourse" she assumes "that it means a source of knowledge to be generated . . . it means socially constructed knowledge . . . it means communities of discourse. We all live in discursive communities of several kinds" (p. 1). In regard to the importance of discursive communities and dialogic relationships, Garman refers to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and writes:

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) says these are necessarily dialogic activities. He reminds us that there must be "engagement" for a learning relationship to take place and that it is not enough to have a dual or multiple relationship of exchanged ideas, but rather it is the nature of that relationship that matters. He says:

The idea lives not in one person's isolated individual consciousness -- if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into the genuine dialogic relationship with other ideas, with the ideas of others. Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voice, that is, in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voice consciousness the idea is born and lives (p. 188). Thus in Bakhtin's terms, discourse (or dialogism) is the means by which culture lives and renews itself through language. (pp. 1-2)

The type of dialogic relationships of which Garman and Bakhtin speak mark what my experience has been in the Study Group. The dialogic dimensions that are revered and inherent within the group provide a space to explore and shape ideas that are meaningful and potentially transformative. Here scholarly endeavors are fostered and the respectful exchange of ideas is nurtured. There is evidence of openness to multiple perspectives, approaches, realities, and research directions. Engagement in reflection and a commitment to self-critique is supported and encouraged within this discursive community. The power of these dialogic interactions is evident in ways that encourage curiosity, cultivate creativity, and advance critical abilities among the group.

Jane Vella (1994) in her book, *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults*, describes twelve principles for effective adult learning. Four of the twelve areas that Vella describes characterize some of what is so valuable for me in relationship to how the Dissertation Study Group interacts. They are participation of the learner in naming what is to be learned; safety in the environment and the process; praxis: action with reflection or learning by doing; respect for learners as subjects of their own learning (pp. 3-4). I experience these principles of adult learning in my encounters within the study group.

A Contemplative Space

As I alluded to earlier in this think piece, the ways that we engage each other in the study group offer a contemplative space for me. The word contemplation derives from the Latin *templum*, translated as time. It is a diminutive of *tempus* and primarily used to express a separation, partition, or segment of time. In Greek the closest approximation to the word contemplation is *theoria* which comes from the verb *theorein* meaning to intently look at something for a purpose. For the Romans, *templum* designated the spatial and took the form of an actual space sectioned off for the augurs to read signs and omens gleaned from looking at the viscera of birds. The *templum* eventually came to be seen as a sacred place where holy persons prognosticated divine meanings they culled from signs or omens. While the temple was an actual place where sacred persons came to portend, predict, and give witness to divine promises, contemplation came to mean not a physical place but the act of beholding, gazing or looking attentively at the insides of something or someone (Downey, 1993, p. 210). One central dimension of contemplation is awareness. Deep awareness can lead to an experience where the distance between myself and that upon which I am gazing diminishes to such an extent that there is a unitive encounter. In contemplation there is interrelatedness. Within the study group there is a commitment to enter into deep consideration and deliberation about ideas, the writing that persons bring for feedback, the writing process and a variety of issues that emerge as the group's agenda. Because of the ways that persons attentively enter into this deliberative process of learning, a contemplative space is shaped. This contemplative space is space made sacred through the respect and power of the interactions.

Noreen's dining room table is a sacred space. Every three weeks or so we gather around this oval table to engage in nourishing exchanges. The table is always filled with delicious and carefully prepared food. It provides a contemplative space where we can gather and engage in compelling and meaningful conversations. Certain spaces come to embody significance and meaning which can be construed as sacred space. In tracing the etymology of the word "sacred" in the ancient world, Dudley Young (1991) contends that

In the beginning supernatural power is experienced by primitive man as energy that interrupts or intensifies the normal flow of events -- an obvious example is the thunderstorm. By degrees, through the use of ritual and sympathetic magic, he seeks to harness this power so that it may animate and sustain the fabric of human orderliness that we call culture. . . . What are we to call this power? . . . The word favored by anthropologists since Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) is "the sacred," denoting a range of experience set apart from and opposed to the everyday "profane" or "secular." (Young, 1991, p. 309)

Young explores "five primitive locations or settings for the coming and going of divinity: the womb, the Jewish Ark of the Covenant, the hearth, the sacred wood at Nemi, and the dancing

ground of Dionysus,” all of which, except for the last one, he relates as “preliminary versions of the temple.” Young connects the notion of these spaces “for the coming and going of divinity” (p. 209) as sacred.

Space that allows for the powers within persons to have room to emerge is space that is rendered sacred. Learning places where each person is responsible for his/her own learning and, in turn, feels responsible for the learning of one another is space made sacred through significant human exchange. The experiences of all members of a group are central to the creation of a sacred space. The sharing of power is critical in creating sacred space where a participatory process of listening and talking to one another is at the heart of the interaction. Whenever persons enter into unfamiliar spaces and attempt to think and learn in new ways, there can be awkwardness, yet moving with integrity and being open to a connection with others can render these spaces sacred. Closed and controlled spaces prevent the sacred from taking shape. Making a space sacred is related to a view of power. The sacred has been defined too narrowly. Boundaries need to be stretched to include ordinary space, like a dining room table, that is rendered sacred by meaningful and powerful human exchanges.

Young’s discussion of the hearth is very poignant in the way that it speaks of sacred space. He says that:

Another prologue to the temple is the hearth, the fire around which we gather to eat together and offer hospitality to the stranger. The hearth is sacred not only because it is a space in which we remember the tribal or household gods, but more simply because it is where weapons may be confidently set aside while the bonds of kinship are ritually renewed in giving and taking. (Young, 1991, p. 214)

The dining room table around which we gather as a study group is for me a type of contemporary hearth. Being around this hearth offers hospitality, comfort, and safety. I am not suggesting a type of hospitality, comfort, and safety that is without its vulnerability. Sharing ideas and making them available to others for interaction can be a costly grace. When we open ourselves up to the critique and exchange from others, we can sometimes experience inadequacy and fear. This willingness to enter into the darkness can be costly, but it can also lead to grace. Viewed in this way grace is construed as unforeseen gifts such as personal insights, intellectual understanding and wisdom. The word wisdom, as utilized in theology and Scripture, comes from the Latin word *sapientia* which is derived from the word *sapere*, meaning to taste and to savor (Downey, 1993). The Oxford English Dictionary further describes wisdom in the following ways: “capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life . . . knowledge; enlightenment, learning, erudition.” Wisdom makes understanding possible when we dwell on a lived experience, an idea, a troubling event/encounter in such a way as to taste and savor the meanings that it reveals. The study group provides a place where dwelling on ideas and experiences are encouraged and valued.

In conclusion, Dwayne Huebner (1995) claims that education should be concerned with and attend to the journey of the self and all that gets in the way of this journey should be rejected. Huebner is critical of the ways that educators describe what is happening in a person’s life as “learning theory” or “developmental theory”(p. 18) categories that remove the journey of the self from its sacred realm and reduce it to a technical process. For me, Huebner’s notion of education as inseparable from the journey of the self offers insight into the kinds of learning opportunities and meaning that I experience as a member of the Dissertation Study Group.

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