

Study Group: Engaging Multiple “Selves”

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When Noreen invited me to Study Group, I didn't initially understand its nature, nor did I realize how my “self” would be engaged and/or troubled by becoming a member. After having Noreen for a class, I simply accepted her “mildly worded invitation,” as Maria describes it, assuming that somehow she had determined that I should belong. At the time I remember holding a rather nebulous understanding that the group gathered to talk about writing and only after attending the first meeting did I fully realize that the focus was on qualitative inquiry and completing dissertations. Yet, this knowledge did not trouble me, even though I hadn't yet decided if I would write a dissertation. My distress came with realizing the *public* nature of the talk and writing – this realization rousing old fears. To explain, I'll sketch some of my personal history and talk about ways Study Group engaged aspects of my “self” in many and sometimes unsettling ways.

I began attending Study Group late into my second decade of teaching high school English while on sabbatical to pursue doctoral studies. I recall that first night -- how group members talked about their studies and read drafts of their writing. Presenting was voluntary. Noreen and Maria, as well as other members, asked questions and responded to what was said or read as a writer worked through some phase of her dissertation. Each Thursday night meeting unfolded in much the same way.

I recall sitting back, watching. I remember noting how each presenter seemed satisfied with the feedback she received. If a writer began in uncertainty, questions posed by the group members helped shape her ideas. If she seemed stuck, there was always someone who had experienced similar blocks to offer insights. Then too, suggestions for reading came readily. On some occasions a member gave an “update” or oral summary of what she was working on or how she was thinking. This meant she had no writing to share. Often the discussion was intellectually intense as each person worked independently on her study but in dialogue with the group.

As months passed, my understanding about the thinking required for a good qualitative study deepened; yet, instead of feeling intimidated at the prospect of writing a dissertation, I saw Study Group as a way to hone thinking. I saw how the deliberations of the Group continually provoked examination of assumptions and provided a critical audience for writing. I saw, too, how Study Group maintained itself on reciprocity, on dynamics of works in progress and work *through* a process – each author writing and thinking, then writing and thinking again.

So, it wasn't the idea of doing research or writing that I found off-putting. It was the public nature of the group; the public way I would need to place my uncertainty on the table in full view of others -- this expectation threatened fragile places in me. Ill at ease with stumbling down paths of unfinished thoughts, of sharing initial writings, uncomfortable with the idea of entering the give and take of talk, even though I clearly saw the merits of the process -- these conditions raked my dread. That dread, to an outsider, may seem hard to accept considering my profession.

As an English teacher, I, like other teachers, daily stand in front of students spreading the word of my discipline. I dispense “expert” knowledge. I address parent groups. In sum, I assume a public role and enact my profession in a public space where I am credentialed and authorized to carry out public expectations. Yet, occupying the center space of the classroom and embodying this public role is sometimes problematic for me. I have thought about the apparent contradictions here.

By nature reserved, perhaps I am drawn to literature because reading distances me from my subject – fictionalized lives, fictionalized characters. Yet, perhaps I do what I do because I love the way the literature engages those very aspects of my ‘self’ that I shade, keep close and private. Perhaps too, literature offers me a way to interact *with* the lived experiences of others, in hope, as Dillard (1989) says, the writer “will magnify and dramatize our days,” bestow “the possibility for meaningfulness” (pp. 72-73).

So, in spite of my personal need to remain private, there is an equally strong desire to seek that meaningfulness with others, to share the experience of literature. And thus, to be a literature teacher, I realize I need to open the “self” uncomfortable with public display so that other “selves” may be fulfilled. Study Group, and the fears it awakened, demanded the same kind of response from me. It required that I work through my dread, gather up multiple and

contradictory features of 'self,' challenge and engage them.

Thus, to overcome my dread, I had to confront those places my fear constructed – places where uncertainty and not knowing lurked. I first learned to accept there was much I didn't and couldn't know. Struggling with and through doubt, admitting that it was OK not to know, seeing that others had visited the same places, that they freely offered suggestions and generously responded to my ideas -- these understandings pushed me forward, spurred me to other rounds of thinking. Heron (1996) talks about "creative tension," an apt descriptor of what was occurring within me.

"Creative tension" kept me working. I continued to read literature and to research; this made me realize that other teachers had similar thoughts and experiences. I became more deliberative, more reflective and critical in my thinking. I became more comfortable. While I continued to feel the vulnerable aspects of 'self' challenged during group sessions, I also sensed the changes in me. My teaching changed, too. I came to see the possibilities inherent in risking my 'self' and saw the transformation in my way of being in the world.

Another thing that steadied my footing was the suggestion from Noreen and Maria to write my experiences. This may seem so small a point, yet, its implications are profound. While there were things I couldn't know, certainly my experience was my own. Nothing, after all, is more ours, more real, as Sara Teasdale (1985) says, than what we have done, inexorably, unalterably done. I reminded myself that no one speaks from my experience but me, that the "truest" way to begin to make sense of my experience and to progress in a study about my teaching was to find the knowledge in my experience *and to accept experience as knowledge*. So, I kept a teaching journal. I wrote narratives of experiences that troubled me. I examined my life. I then shared my writing with Group.

I came to see that *because* Study Group involved so many aspects of 'self' in its process – especially those most vulnerable -- something enlivening happened. While risk was present, so was renewal.

Now I know. Risk uncertainty. Risk the self-conscious. Growth will follow.

References

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