

**Studying At the Table**  
**Nourishment for the Professional Self**

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A Think Piece on Study Groups

An Appetizer--The Introduction

This Think Piece serves as a narrative of my involvement with the Dissertation Writing Study Group. Through this writing, I describe my perspectives of initiation, intimidation, inclusion, investiture, inquiry and intricate intellectual immersion as I have connected with this Study Group over the years. In this piece, I lay out defining stages of my scholarly needs, aspirations and doubts as well as interpretations of my unfolding professional Self. This piece is purposefully presented as a metaphor of an elaborate meal in an attempt to convey the sense of intellectual sustenance I have enjoyed at the Study Group Table.

An Invitation--My Initiation to the Study Group

Almost a decade of summers ago, my telephone rang. I pulled my head (and tumultuous Dissertation contemplations) out of one of the many kitchen cabinets which I organize each summer before returning to my elementary classroom teaching position in the Fall. I stepped down off the wooden chair and answered the phone before the fourth ring.

My friend's voice returned my "Hello". "It's Nolan!"<sup>1</sup> I thought excitedly. "My graduate school friend, long distance public school teaching companion, and now my dissertation beacon (having recently and successfully defended her Ph D)." Not *just* Nolan anymore but "DOCTOR"--a title I coveted and hoped to earn for myself since I had just completed my own doctoral coursework the previous term.

"Wouldn't you know?" she said, "I was thinking of you and I ran into Noreen at the University. I told her about your work in creative dramatics. She has a Writing Study Group that meets at her home every few weeks to talk about their studies. Some of the people in the Group have finished their dissertations and others, like you, are just starting to write. The Group's input was SO helpful to me as I worked on my dissertation. You can bring as much or as little writing as you want each time and the Group will give you feedback. Sometimes people don't have anything written to share and just listen to each other and offer comments. I asked Noreen if you could come to the Group too next week to see if you are interested."

"Interested?!" I thought, "Intrigued and relieved is more like it"--for I had NO idea how to even begin to write a dissertation document even though the University's registration form listed me as working on my 18 hours of dissertation research. If this Study Group had paved the way for Nolan's successful work, perhaps I too could discover the magic Group formula to complete my own dissertation.

Intellectual Indigestion--Feelings of Intimidation

I stood on Noreen's doorstep, holding the salad I had brought to share with the Study Group, finger poised above the doorbell. A wave of unexpected panic swept over

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym.

me as I stood there on the small concrete stoop in front of Noreen's commanding three-story home. I looked longingly down the tree-lined street towards my car (and safety) and thought, "Why would University people welcome **me**--a public school primary classroom teacher into their Study Group--who am I to think I could ever earn a doctoral degree?"

But, Nolan was right, the dozen or so women that sat around Noreen's impressive oblong wooden dining room table did make me feel welcome as we shared our food and introductions. Soon the pleasantries gave way to more directed conversations about people's completed dissertations, their desire to write, study statuses, University timelines, reflective portfolios, special education agendas, psychology research, and suggestions from the Group for investigating more extended scholarly references.

That evening I listened deeply, ate a little, and spoke hardly at all. The substance of the conversations was fascinating yet so much seemed incomprehensible to me. The more I heard, the more convinced I became that Nolan had made a terrible mistake in including me in the Group. When she and I met in the kitchen, I whispered, "I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't think I'm smart enough to be a part of this writing

group. Just listen to them talk-- they know something about EVERYTHING--you understand what they're saying, but I don't get it! I don't think I'm coming back."

#### Food for Thought--Inclusion in the Deliberative Conversations

As I mentally replayed the Study Group's conversations over the next few weeks, I realized that the opportunity to share in even a small part of knowledge that surrounded that Table was too valuable to respond to with "regrets only." And so I physically prevailed over my intellectual insecurities and arrived at the next meeting, bringing not just a salad, but also great trepidation concerning my academic ability to join in the Group's on-going discussions. For a long while, I sat in silence at the Table, just like an uncomfortable school child, hoping to not draw any attention to myself, praying that no one would direct a question my way, grateful to be able to listen to the incredible conversations that covered the Table. I took copious notes and tried to make sense of; "guiding questions", "interpretive stances", "review of literature", "teacher journals", "research proclivities", "literary criticism", and "narrative inquiry". I was intrigued and overwhelmed, yet I knew the energy and inquiry insights of the Group were necessary for me to author my own dissertation in a way that did not necessarily fit the research frameworks of my Committee Chair and Research Psychologist father—two of my initial Dissertation guides.

The Study Group consistently (relentlessly, I might have said at that earlier time) turned their attention to me and to "my Study". These 2 simple words breathed life into my writing and made the dissertation process become three-dimensional for me. The Group members explained terminologies and possible inquiry avenues and asked me how I would frame my own work. Gradually, my study began to shape itself in a way that I found both deliciously palatable and appropriately presented.

Maria, a co-leader of the Group, gave sage and indisputable advice, "Just get something down on paper, no matter HOW bad it is. You **MUST** write your way into the Study." It is advice that I intentionally invoke with each and every writing project in which I currently engage, because for me and for others at the Table, writing IS

thinking made visible, a valuable record of how one's deliberations and perspectives evolve over time, and a way to engage in deliberation with others' thoughts and knowledge. (And also, just plain hard, time-consuming work--no magic Group formulas supplied!)

Over the next long months, the Group faithfully read what I wrote and gave me feedback on its clarity, direction, verity, and interpretive rigor. (Piantanida and Garman, 1999). At times such scrutiny and direct honesty was painful, but always necessary for the substantive growth of my document. I completed my doctoral degree with satiated confidence and a renewed appetite for on-going inquiry.

### Another Invitation--Individual Interest in a Second Group Seating

During the time that I worked on my Dissertation and consulted with the Writing Study Group, I also shared parts of my research and writing with a number of school district colleagues and had long, informal discussions with several of them about continuing professional education, instructional issues, the import of District policies on pedagogy and the implications of current readings in the elementary educational field.

One of my colleagues in particular, Joanie<sup>2</sup>, was intrigued by the Study Group conversations that I often quoted and had even attended a meeting with me. She and I craved a local forum where we could discuss pedagogical theories specifically about elementary education as well as a place to share various (and tentative) writing pieces on which we were working. We also hoped to learn more about inquiry-based thinking stances for both ourselves and our students.

Both Joanie and I were well-acquainted with several colleagues that we valued as deliberative thinkers and began to solicit their interest in meeting together as a Study Group. Since many of these teachers were also close friends, we identified several potential Study Group pitfalls:

we had to avoid the more social flavor of our traditional monthly restaurant get-togethers (where we (un) professionally vented and, at times, even gossiped),

we had to propose a focused, vital reason enticing enough to ask often-exhausted teachers to expend the time and energy required in meeting, talking, and thinking together every other week,

and we needed to find a consistent place to convene that was geographically convenient for everyone.

Our initial meeting took place during the Summer at Joanie's home. She and I had prepared an Agenda for the meeting, provided food and facilitated discussion. At that meeting, the 8 of us discussed study group definitions in general, possible areas of interest for elaborated educational thinking, and the practical issue of scheduling the meetings. We agreed to use the professional development Study Group Framework of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and Whole Language Umbrella (WLU), *Teacher Inquiry: Spelling Matters* (1996) and I was designated to

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<sup>2</sup> Also a pseudonym.

purchase the packet to bring to our meetings in the Fall. We had also decided to bring snacks and to take turns meeting on-site in one of our classrooms an hour or two after the children had left for the day. (In theory, those hours were to give us time to “wrap-up the school day” and re-energize our thoughts about inquiry.)

At the next meeting, 6 of us were in attendance. Most of us had read over the NCTE packet articles that Joanie and I had selected and distributed. As we discussed our readings, we raised some points of interest and possible inquiry questions to pursue in our respective classrooms. We also “shared individual professional stories” and followed a “loosely structured format of dialogue about our experiences and ideas” and “made decisions about what to discuss at the next meeting.” (NCTE, 1996).

At that subsequent meeting, only 5 of us were able to attend. In addition to the agenda that we followed at the previous meeting, we also decided to register for a Spelling Video Conference to be held at a local University later that month.

At the meeting after the video conference (which 4 of us had attended), we discussed the video participants’ points of agreement/argument and described which of the techniques we would incorporate in our own classrooms. (Some of which I utilize to this very day!) By this time, some notable trends were evolving in our Spelling Study Group:

fragmented sidebar conversations were often taking place instead of inclusive listening to one member’s thoughts followed by an adding on of a Group perspective or collective questions for further investigation. (One member in particular, persistently related anecdotes about her own students and daily teaching and frequently cut off elaborated discussion or questions, and since we were all friends, we never “called her on it”),

conversations were tending to take place on more of a surface level rather than through in-depth probing and connecting of universal experiences to the topics (e.g., “You have Bradley Schmidt<sup>3</sup>, why he had trouble passing the Spelling Test when he was in **my** second grade classroom!! How is he doing now? I remember when his one time when his mother called me and said.....”). Our intellectual dialogue seemed to be fading and shoptalk gossip came creeping in,

our numbers were dwindling as the reality of the school year was setting in--what seemed personally possible and professionally desirable during our initial Summer meeting was being subsumed by other more pressing demands on our members’ time, their varied family schedules and our collective intellectual energies,

because our numbers were dwindling and attendance varied, it was difficult to follow-through with consistent inquiry questions regarding our teacher research,

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym.

Joanie and I lacked the leadership expertise to call the Group back into focus and to redirect our attention on the Spelling and Inquiry agendas.

By mid-year, none of us was able to sustain the focused energies or consistent interest that being a part of a viable study group requires. We cancelled the January meeting (due to wintry weather) and never reconvened.

#### Des(s)erting The Group--Investiture in Deliberative Learning

During the short life of the Spelling Study Group and for many years after its demise, I also continued to faithfully attend the Dissertation Study Group meetings, for I was now an elder Group member and my dissertation experiences were considered to be helpful to those who were in various stages of their own dissertation journeys. As people talked at length about their own Study experiences and shared related literature, I was introduced to theories, educational perspectives, varied workplaces and scholarly landscapes that I would never have discovered on my own. Through reading the work of other Group members, I continued to exercise scholarly thought and to contribute to the deliberative discussion in a way that is not available to me in my isolated primary school classroom.

However, the Table was becoming crowded, and two of the Group members who had initially been invited to the Study Group as I was in the final stages of dissertation writing/defense had just completed their own dissertations. At one meeting as we celebrated their Study successes, I looked around the packed Table and said to my friend, Micheline, "I always felt that I'd stay as long as it took you to finish. You've earned your Ed. D., now it's time for me to give up my seat to a beginning Dissertation writer. It's my turn to cycle out and to let someone new to join the Group." Everyone around the Table looked at me in amazement--as if I'd harbored an uncivilized and somewhat crazed thought. Finally Kathy burst out, "NOT ME--I'm NOT giving my place up at this Table EVER!!" The Group consensus was with Kathy. Resiliently (and admirably in my view) the Group began "morphing" (Tananis,2000) from a Dissertation Study Group to a more inclusive and varied Writing Study Group.

So, what meaning do these Group relationships hold for me as an individual "Doctor in the Classroom" (Richards, 1996), why was I unable to desert the Table, and how does my Dissertation-Writing Study Group experience connect with State and District-mandated professional development issues?

#### Reserving a Place At The Table--Intellectual Immersion

As I have considered both my own personal and District/State imposed continuing professional education agendas, it has been difficult for me to categorize my Study Group (s) experiences. Although I didn't consider the Spelling Study Group experience to be a "failure", I have often thought about the intensity of the dissertation process and the scholarly level of commitment that helps to consistently sustain the Writing Study Group, yet appeared to be noticeably lacking in the Spelling Study Group.

As one of the Writing Study Group members, Maria, was reading initial drafts of this think piece, she commented, "It seems to me that the social, restaurant group might have been the real study group experience **not** the Spelling group." Initially, I

was taken aback by her comment, for Joanie and I had worked hard to distance the common, ordinary, everyday workplace conversations/gripes from our perceived intellectual Spelling/Writing teacher-research agendas. Yet, had we become so distanced from what were emotional (and vital) educational conjectures and therapeutic (yet deliberative) dialogues at the restaurant meetings---had we so strongly superimposed the outside educational agenda (NCTE Spelling Inquiry), that we unintentionally extinguished the Spelling Group's continuing interest and commitment?

In retrospect, perhaps it would have been helpful to have allotted some of our precious-perceived meeting time to acknowledge "our teacher role experiences" and "what was on our minds as people" before addressing the professional spelling research agendas. Instead, with all the best of 'intellectual' intentions, Joanie and I attempted to divorce and purge the social nature of the conversations entirely from those 'elevated' spelling study group discussions and in doing so, may have unknowingly eradicated what was at the core of the members' educational interests.

Most likely, the varied restaurant settings of the social group were also helpful in facilitating renewed energy at the end of a long school day, even though most group members were resistant to having study group meetings "off-site" because of the travel time required. Walking down the hallway from one classroom to another or driving ten minutes from school building to building may have been convenient but not necessarily conducive to rekindling the energy needed to cultivate inspired thinking at the end of a lengthy school day. (Interestingly, the restaurant meetings were always held on a Friday evening.)

Other key elements that seem to have been lacking in the spelling study group's tenure were; professional passion in inquiry, a diverse membership, skilled leadership, and a level of conceptual sophistication necessary to frame the group's educational experiences. All of these dynamic characteristics are evident in the Writing Study Group and are compelling reasons for my continued participation in the Group over the years.

### Cordial Considerations--Savoring the Intricate Intellectual Flavors

#### A Passion for Learning

Each member of the Dissertation Writing Group has her own story to relate about her impassioned need to craft a personally-distinct dissertation and how the Writing Study Group engaged, pushed, challenged, and demanded that she learn about her educational setting and scholarly self in more depth than she ever could have undertaken on her own. This passion for understanding oneself through thinking and writing has transcended dissertation defense deadlines and embodied itself in our on-going work on: book chapters, conference proposals, presentation papers, articles, arts-based research, curriculum papers, personal essays, and this study on Becoming A Study Group for Act 48 requirements. Our diverse written work is at the core of our Study Group. It is framed by educational perspectives and deliberative dialogues which are based on our individual and collective on-going intellectual inquiries.

#### Diversity in Membership

We are a diverse group of elementary, secondary, and university-affiliated educators, counselors, and consultants who meet in a setting apart from any of

our workplaces. We are versatile in our deliberations and varied in our worldviews. Sometimes we bring a great deal to vociferously deliberate and at other times we are quieter and more probing--intense and pointed questions are posed at times. Occasionally we debate to the point of argument. Always, we evidence synergy (Theory into Practice, 2000), if one of us is not able to attend the Group meeting, we are quick to send out a synopsis of our thoughts electronically and invite further comment, for each of us seems to value learning through the consideration of others' perspectives and through the sharing of expertise that each of us brings to the Table. While we have much in common, we also bring a wide-ranging bounty of personal insights and professional settings to share and savor.

### Leadership and Life-long Learning

Unlike Joanie and I, Maria and Noreen, allow time for the Study Group to gather, chat as the food is being set out, and share personal updates with one another before asking, "Who wants to be on the Agenda this evening?" Once the agenda is compiled, both are practiced at keeping the Group on-task and at apportioning the time. Both facilitate conversation which allows for description, speculation, and tentativeness in each member's shared writing, yet both promote rigor, an understanding of conceptual underpinnings, and a commitment to intellectual inquiry. As Mohr and Dichter (2001), have said of the essential role of the group leader, Maria and Noreen ".....push us when we get stuck, do the work that we'd rather not do, and remind us of our agreements." (In contrast, Joanie and I were unwilling to remind our Spelling group of their agreement to attend the meetings consistently or to do the leader's work of keeping the conversation focused on inquiry issues rather than personal agendas.)

Perhaps, most importantly, through their personal and professionally-stated philosophies, their dedication to responding to the Group's voluminous (at times) writings, sharing their own writing, and through the embodiment of dedicated, deliberative demeanors, they both evidence a commitment to their own on-going passion for scholarly learning. They envision themselves first and foremost as Writing Study Group members yet are able to assume the role of Group leader when necessary.

### Striving for Conceptual Sophistication

At the beginning of this Think piece, I shared my initial hopes that the Writing Study Group would unveil the "magic dissertation formula" to me. Instead, I became part of a Group which challenged me to examine my assumptions about research, pressed me to author a distinctly unique narrative dissertation, accompanied me on my intellectual inquiries, surrounded me with a group of knowledgeable experts, and provided a culture of collegial, conceptual conversations. An unstated, but for me internalized obligation in order to keep my "reserved place at the Table", is to continue to participate in scholarly dialogues and to author intellectual writings. Through the writing of this Think piece and as a part of this Act 48 Study Group on study groups, I have had the opportunity to consider the characteristics of a flourishing Study Group and to contemplate how those characteristics have become integrated into my pedagogy and professional being as a person, a teacher, a learner, and a life-long inquirer.

## Deliberative Learning and Professional Development--'Take-out' From The Table

As a classroom teacher 'practicing elementary education' in the state of Pennsylvania, Act 48 (PDE, 2000) mandates that I acquire 180 hours of "quality professional growth offerings" every five years or risk the suspension of my teaching certificate. Initially, many of my school district colleagues asked if I found it 'ridiculous' that I was required to participate in such continuing education activities since I had already obtained a doctoral degree. I answered that I found it ridiculous that once Pennsylvania educators obtained the delineated 180 hours, PDE had no intention of taking note of any further continuing professional experiences and intended to 'wipe clean' educators' professional development records every 5 years. I continue to wonder how this kind of bureaucratic disregard for life-long professional education experiences and internalized personal intellectual journeys can "create a high quality educator workforce in Pennsylvania". In truth, such mechanical guidelines and thoughtless timetables make me feel more like one of my students forced to choose from the predetermined daily lunch menu than a "conscientious professional committed to quality professional development and growth" (p. 2).

Yet, my Study Group colleague, Cindy, who has helped "to form an interconnecting system of professional education resources" through her work with the School Performance Network and the Writing Study Group, keeps reminding me that she views Act 48 "as an opportunity rather than simply a mandate". And so, I take this opportunity to look again at the "criteria and expectations for continuing professional education programs" and to focus on how writing this think piece about Act 48 and study groups has been "designed to expand (this) professional educator's skills and/or knowledge base" (p. 14).

Most certainly, as I have expressed throughout this piece, I have found my learning years with the Writing Study Group to be the epitome of a "quality professional growth" experience. Through voluntary on-going dialogues with these "critical friends" (Jehen, 2001), I am able to think more deeply and desire to focus more fully on many aspects of my professional work. I am more inclined to revisit pedagogical issues from new perspectives and to be re-energized in building connections with each of my primary pupils, student teachers and district colleagues as I consider the diverse dialogues I have taken away from the Study Group Table. Through sharing in the Group's extensive buffet of theoretical thoughts, practical experiences and commitment to educational research, I have internalized a sense of inquiry into my own daily teaching and intellectual thinking.

As Stigler and Hiebert (1999) say, "The success of the system (for improving teaching) depends on teachers' initiative, creativity, and professional commitment" (p. 169). The women that have committed themselves to participation in the Writing Study Group certainly embody these characteristics. Stigler and Hiebert also believe that "a profession is not created by certificates and censures but by the existence of a substantive body of professional knowledge...and by the genuine desire of the profession's members to improve their practice" (p. 171). The desire to know my teaching more deeply and to discover scholarly avenues for intellectual nourishment brought me to the Dissertation Writing group initially. At the Table I have partaken in the bridging of many professional worlds and a wide-ranging banquet of educational experiences.

What I have taken away from the Table is not "stated behaviorally" or easily

“measurable” (PDE, 2001, p.12) for I have ingested the professional need and scholarly obligation to be continually worthy of the title of Doctor of Education. For me, this is a specialized intellectual hunger, which cannot be satiated by “clearly identified course objectives” or “mastery of stated course competencies” (PDE 2001, pp. 11-12); it is not simply professional development “To Go”. For this “Doctor in the Classroom” (Richards, 1996), the Writing Study Group has been a ‘provider’ of academic sustenance through on-going inquiry and dedicated deliberation within a community of colleagues committed to scholarly writing and intellectual introspection—an ‘all-you-can-eat’, self-served plateful of study, contemplation, conversation, and learning.

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