

A Journey to Discursive Learning: A Think Piece on “Study” and Learning

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To *study*: apply the mind, make a close study, to think intently, to 'take thought' anxiously, to wonder, to ponder over, meditate upon, to examine in detail, seek to become minutely acquainted with or to understand, to exercise thought and deliberation (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989).

Introduction

This “think piece” focuses on the notion of “study” and how I have experienced “study” as both a student and educator. My journey is one of transformation, of “morphing” from a view of myself as a passive, receiver of knowledge from others to that of an active, creator of knowledge within a discursive community.

My Journey as a Student and Educator

To study, to yearn and search for knowledge. As an educator, study is an important concept for me to consider, from the perspectives of both student and teacher. Study for me holds the promise of new lands of adventure, new horizons of thought, exciting opportunities that I could barely imagine. As a child I found a safe and steady pleasure in knowledge. School for me was my “home” where the world was predictable; I could work hard to “master” knowledge and found rewards for the effort.

As a young student, even through high school, I came to accept a “received” view of knowledge and learning. The onus for my learning as a student, was more the responsibility of my teachers. I had internalized a view of myself as a receptacle for knowledge, a more or less blank slate to be written upon, a vessel to be filled. From this perspective, my role was clear, as was my teacher’s. I thought my job was to be the best blank slate I could be, the best available vessel --- attentive, open, willing to receive the knowledge my teachers were responsible to “give” to me.

As I entered college, I became both more aware of the need to be a more active partner in learning, choosing experiences and courses to meet my needs, selecting areas of study, and even choosing the professors I wanted. I worked fulltime while going to college; perhaps handing over dollars across a cashier’s counter helped to hone my sense of myself as an active partner and director of my own learning. College offered a more diverse world of knowledge, and of learning experiences.

As I entered my junior and senior years, I was especially active in my learning as I began to dialogue with professors in my major field, to discuss texts, concepts, issues, to engage in what I would later come to call scholarly deliberation. Still, during this period, I saw knowledge as a near-static and bounded “thing” that I would discover, uncover, receive from others, and if I worked hard enough, somehow “master.” While I engaged in deliberation about ideas with professors and others, I never felt quite an equal in the

process, feeling more the mentored, the taught. Interestingly, as I began my teaching career after graduation, I carried this more passive, received view of knowledge and, in a somewhat naïve way, applied it in my teaching, wherein I became the holder of knowledge with the ultimate responsibility of communicating “it” to my students.

I have deliberately framed these notions in a somewhat caricaturized way. It was never quite *this* black and white, never quite *this* one-dimensional, but the thick lines and the and somewhat overdone characteristics of caricature can sometimes help me see things that I too often “soften” through the lens of self-impression, my own attempt to be likeable and good, even to myself. The fact is, I was a “good” student and a “good” teacher. I tried my best, I worked hard, I cared about learning, I valued knowledge, I tried to apply everything I had been taught as I started to teach others ... I did what I thought I was supposed to do, both as a student and as a teacher. For the better part of my educational experience, it worked.

Somewhere along the line, it stopped working in quite the way it once had ... I started to re-vision my own learning (first) and my teaching (second). More than the caricatured neat and organized lines that helped to define quite separate roles of student and teacher where one would “give” and the other “receive” knowledge, learning became more than just an exchange and more of a discursive experience.

A Call to Study Differently

My own call to doctoral study came from a sense of intellectual isolation. I had left teaching after a number of years and entered the tangential world of educational program evaluation. My growing discontent with one-dimensional roles for student and teacher and a “received” view of knowledge was fueled even more as I practiced evaluation. I was responsible for helping to generate information about academic programs to help with planning and decision-making. As I went about my work, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the notion that as an evaluator I was, in fact, “creating” knowledge (information about the conduct, progress and success of program) in relative isolation from the people the program was designed to serve or the people actually planning and implementing it. So too, I was isolated in my own profession and had few opportunities to learn with colleagues. Even in a large school district, there aren’t many “evaluators” to join for a professional chat over lunch. I was growing weary, feeling stale --- I longed for an avenue to explore new ideas and to do that in a community of learners where we could exchange ideas about our practice. To be frank, I also thought an advanced degree would benefit my career. (As I look back now, I think it ironic that in some ways, to justify the resources that would be required to pursue graduate study, I felt a need to see potential career benefit, i.e., monetary reward --- and consequently devalued the desire to learn for learning’s sake).

A Call to Study Discursively

Early in my doctoral career, I was fortunate to be around faculty and student colleagues who challenged (though I certainly didn’t name it as such then, nor do I think they set out

to do it either) my notion of knowledge, of study, of learning. What started as a consumer notion, even as a grad student wanting to put together my menu of courses to take where I could be “given” what I needed to know, slowly evolved into a new conception of shared knowledge, both in its creation and its consideration.

I came to embrace a more expansive notion --- a more discursive, deliberative conceptualization of knowledge and learning was intriguing. As the earlier descriptors from the OED offer, I came to “think intently ... to ponder ... to exercise thought and deliberation.” This notion held new possibilities. I could take knowledge and transform it to new knowledge in dialogue with others --- through writing, reading, and deliberation. Instead of a passive receptacle, I became a more active and full partner in the process, a valued member of a deliberative community of learners.

This “transformation” as a doctoral student was not an epiphany complete with heralding trumpets and peaceful waves of certainty buffeting me and some of my graduate student colleagues. In fact, it was particularly gut-wrenching, a sometimes brutal shift that I made only with effort and a few battle scars to remind me of just how hard it is to change deeply engrained beliefs. I had to in many ways set aside some of my most successful tools of “learning” --- a steadfast resolve to be independent, fearing that to collaborate would mean that I might get stuck with most or all of the work while others skated through, my more competitive and naturally self-preserving nature that kept me from wanting to air my shortcomings or concerns for fear of looking weak or “dumb,” my willingness to engage in a face-saving unspoken agreement to not challenge each other too much, lest someone else’s discomfort would someday become my own.

All of the benefits that were inherent in a passive and singular view of myself as a learner became reverse challenges as I reconceptualized what it meant to become a discursive learner in a cooperative group. What was once seemingly controllable, seemed now somewhat out of control and unpredictable. What was at one time containable in increments of meeting times and other artificial schedules, now took on a life of its own that was contrary to any of my preconceptions. What was once mine only to *receive* was now mine to create and orchestrate, to engage in and discover. It was both daunting in its challenges and exciting in its possibilities.

Joining the Study Group

My early class experiences in graduate school with study groups helped me to consider a new conception of learning and of studying in collaboration with colleagues. As I finished my doctoral course work I had an opportunity to join a longstanding study group that focused on the dissertation and post-dissertation writing of members who represented many disciplines and interests.¹ The experience brought me to an even deeper reconceptualizing and embodiment of learning in community with colleagues.

¹ for further description of this study group, please see Piantanida, Garman and other authors in this collection of think pieces who describe the study group more fully.

I was challenged to put aside fears of sharing my thinking and writing, to share ideas and remain open to review and critique, to extend my thinking to consider new vistas of knowledge I had not previously considered. The diversity of interest, research approaches, genre and writing style, coupled with the sincere engagement with each person's work brought a wealth of resources to me as I continued to research and write the dissertation.

At first, the diversity seemed a daunting challenge. How was I going to be able to share with these folks when I was the only evaluator at the table? What could I possibly add to the work of other members who were art teachers, English teachers, special education administrators and others? As I sought ways of connecting my own experience and study to theirs, and theirs to mine, I could see the richness of diverse thinking, diverse experience playing out with each of us. We pressed the edges of our thinking to go beyond our more comfortable preconceptions, to seek new perspectives and new lenses from which to write. Together, discursively, in a complex and rich interplay of dialogue, we co-created knowledge. The artificial or imposed boundaries of student/learner and teacher were constantly and gladly blurred.

Discursive learning requires a willingness to participate, and further, a willingness to risk. I must come to the table both willing and ready to learn. I work at engaging in a shared space that can accommodate many styles and tempos for learning, many interests, many voices. My learning is further enhanced when I can overcome my fears of sharing my thinking and writing, opening up areas where I can be ok saying "I don't know, do you?" Equally, I attempt to commit to an intellectual rigor and integrity – not expecting an "atta girl!" when what I most need is insightful critique, nor offering a surface review when my colleagues require the same insightful critique from me.

Learning, Teaching and Practicing Discursively

Studying and learning discursively with colleagues has provided me with a press for thinking, a press for writing, a press for growing professionally, that would have been impossible had I continued to see myself as a more passive "receiver" of knowledge. Through a meaningful study group experience, I envision knowledge as co-created and ever-emerging, a continuous flow, rather than a static set of ideas or concepts that I am called to "master." I have developed a sense of myself as a lifelong learner, beyond a bland acceptance of the term as having something to do with occasionally attending professional development "workshops."

Moreover, re-visioning my own learning has helped me to re-vision how I enact my practice as an evaluator and how I interact with students as a teacher. These inter-connections are inseparable now, each informs and influences the other. As a result, I conduct my practice as an evaluator in a more discursive manner, involving those who plan and administer programs or educational initiatives and other stakeholders, quite directly in thinking about and planning each phase of the evaluation. Together we co-create knowledge about the program or initiative, the context in which it operates, and the complexities of impact and influence.

My teaching today attempts to engage students in *studying* --- thinking deeply, individually and with colleagues, drawing on the commitment to participate and engage called for in a more “open contract” approach of co-agency in learning (Garman, 1989). Rather than assuming a role of “insulated expert” (Tananis, 2000) where I hold and create the knowledge and determine how, when and to whom it is “given,” I attempt engage in a more discursive dialogue with others, both colleagues and students, to co-create knowledge and learning.

Participating in a study group and engaging in a discursive practice and pedagogy does not come without challenges. I still find myself too easily bruised by meaningful critique by my colleagues, and struggle to stay the course and remain open to learn and push my own thinking forward. To enact a discursive practice requires a willing “other” who equally values and is able to respond discursively. Educational institutions are often bastions of imposed order and timing --- 42 minute periods and bells signaling every movement of the day are not conducive to discursive dialogue among colleagues. So too, the external agencies that often need evaluation consultation typically operate on incredibly short timelines both to write the grants and to think about and enact good evaluation. Students who are operating with a “received” view of knowledge, like I was not long ago, can feel bewildered and betrayed when asked (and perhaps required) to engage in learning that involves greater self-direction and agency as well as increased risk.

These challenges, and more, are inherent in a discursive learning context, but, I believe they are outweighed by the potential benefits. Study, for me, today, means to *think deeply*. A good study group provides a space for ideas, the challenge of creating them, articulating them, accounting for them, warranting them with evidence and argumentation, growing them in conjunction with other ideas, watching them take shape beyond what was first even imagined. It is the space that allows me to think most deeply ... to study. I believe working to create such a space, and to engage in it actively, is valuable and essential to support my learning. I invite you to consider what study means for you as a learner and as an educator, and to help to create environments to participate in discursive learning with your colleagues as a meaningful engagement in professional development and lifelong learning.

References

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