

## *Preface*

### **Why This Collection of “Think Pieces”?**

Cynthia A. Tananis, Ed. D.

When the School Performance Network (SPN) began to explore the notion of using educator study groups as a strategy for collaborative professional development and brought up the idea in our conversations about evaluation efforts, I immediately thought of my colleagues and our work in a collaborative study group focused on writing. It seemed to me that our group might be perfectly situated to engage in thinking about study groups since it was a group that had been in successful, sustained existence for a long period of time, and was primarily a group of educators or people involved in education in some way. While the group’s composition had changed over the years, its focus (assisting in dissertation and post-dissertation writing) and processes (providing thoughtful critique and dialogue on education and research-related issues) remained notably consistent.

I had come to value my own participation in the study group, not just as a means to an end in writing the dissertation, but more as a learning space for me to question issues of my practice and thinking as an educator and educational evaluator. As a result of my own experience, I very much wanted to encourage the SPN as well as other school-related initiatives to struggle to overcome the barriers to establishing study groups so that the experience might be more widely available across the region. So too, I cautioned the SPN and others not to take too naïve a position, thinking that establishing and maintaining study groups an easy and uncomplicated task. Working collaboratively as adults was not something that seemed valued or supported within most educational organizations that I had experienced. It seemed that the SPN, and hopefully the region, might gain from a more in-depth study of the nature of study groups as a strategy and process to support professional development.

So too, I thought, perhaps our study group might benefit from the experience. Not only might it be an opportunity for us to sit back a bit from our individual work within the group to reflect more globally on what the experience might mean for us, but also it would provide an opportunity for us to share some of our experience with colleagues across southwestern Pennsylvania. Some of my colleagues decided to give it a try.

I had assumed that the comfort and well-used strategies of our study group would carry over, and that our work would progress smoothly, with little need to pay attention to forming a working culture that supported our work collectively and individually. I was wrong. This was not a “failure” of the study group but rather it was a naïve assumption on my part! We came to affirm in our individual writings (as evidenced in this compilation) just how important cultural aspects of the study group are, just how much attention to individual and collective needs is required to sustain active involvement in a study group, yet my naïveté had assumed we were somehow “beyond” those issues. Though we had come to be quite comfortable as a working study group as we considered our writing, when a smaller group of us came together as a “study group on study groups” we came to form a “new” group that needed to face the challenges of a “new” group, at

least in part. I came to see just how important they are for *all* groups, as we struggled as a “new” study group, to in fact, study ourselves.

As I look back on the process, I have come to see that in many ways, though we had been an established study group, the new focus for this work, in fact, brought with it many of the same stressors and concerns other study group may be faced with: What are our individual and collective roles? What is expected of us and by whom? How will we determine our accountability? How will we juggle external and internal needs? How will we surface and resolve concerns, struggles, suspicions, doubts? How will we engage in a meaningful learning environment that supports our needs and also responds to an external agenda as well (whether by agreement with a group such as the SPN or through the regulations of Act 48<sup>1</sup> or some other external expectation)?

Graciously, my colleagues continued, committed to remain involved, even through the struggle. I am so glad we did. What we have produced is a collection of “think pieces” in various stages of development, with various focal points and a diversity of the “selves” that come together to form this study group --- that speaks to the struggles, the processes, the issues and the promises of engagement in collaborative learning with colleagues. The personal narratives offered here help to explicate the issues and concerns, challenges and opportunities of collegial study as educators. We begin with a piece written by Dr. Maria Piantanida that explores the writing genre of a “think piece” to help the reader understand why we have chosen this form of expression . Each of the subsequent pieces offers the author’s personal experiences as an invitation to the reader to more fully explore issues related to study groups.<sup>2</sup>

As in many learning situations, those that teach also learn. The engaged seasoned “experts” in a study group to produce some documentation that might help guide next steps for the region. In retrospect, the “experts” gained as much from the experience of studying together as the region might from our work --- a fitting statement about the deep benefit of collaborative study. When the commitment to learn and engage is real, the benefits far outweigh the challenges, the experience greatly worth the struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> Act 48 is the Pennsylvania Department of Education regulation related to the conduct and expectations of professional development for educators, enacted in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Using narratives of personal experiences as one way to explore a concept or area of interest is consistent with a more “interpretive” way of knowing or research that is recognized as particularly helpful in educational research, especially in practice-based research.

## **A Think Piece on “Think Pieces”**

Maria Piantanida, Ph.D.

### **What is a “Think Piece”?**

A “think piece” is a form of writing that is less polished than a formal paper or presentation but more fully developed than an entry in a personal or professional journal. Initially, think pieces are written for an audience of one--the author--who is writing to discover what she/he is thinking about a particular topic. Fairly early in the writing process, however, the audience expands to allow for discussion of the ideas that are being explored and developed by the author.

Within an organized academic course, the writing of think pieces may be initiated by an instructor as a way of helping learners connect with the subject matter under study. Within such formal contexts, think pieces can reduce the grading risk associated with an “all or nothing” term paper. Think pieces allow the instructor to communicate with learners throughout the semester, to see the evolution of thinking, and to suggest resources that can further the learners’ understanding.

Once professionals catch on to the idea of think pieces, the impetus for writing comes from within--regardless of whether they are in a formally structured educational program or learning on their own. In other words, the topic or focus of the think piece is tied to a genuine interest or concern of the author’s, not merely a desire to comply with a course requirement or external professional expectation.

The starting point for a think piece may lie in the author’s experience--an observation about a student, a stimulating conversation with a colleague, an off-hand remark, a nagging question, recurring problem, confusing or anxiety-ridden event. Just as likely, the desire to write a think piece might be sparked by an intriguing idea presented at a workshop, a complex issue described in a journal, a question posed within a book, or another person’s think piece. In short, professionals are immersed in potential topics for think pieces. Tapping into this wealth of potential topics is a matter of personal desire to examine and develop one’s own thinking in relation to a concept, issue, question, problem, dilemma, event, experience, etc.

Thus, think pieces provide a focal point for deliberation about a topic of importance and substance. Initially, it is a personal, private deliberation--an author putting his/her thoughts on paper (or computer screen), reviewing what has been written, deciding whether or not the words express his/her views, and adding or changing the draft as appropriate. This type of private deliberation is an important process of discovering what one thinks and knows.

It is not uncommon for individuals to resist the idea of writing either by arguing that they already know what they think and therefore writing is unnecessary or that they come to know through talking and therefore writing interferes with their natural mode of understanding. Neither of these arguments is very persuasive for the following reasons. The discipline of finding words to convey one’s thoughts and committing those words to paper often has surprising results. Sometimes what seems to clear when considered casually, becomes perplexing when put into writing. Sometimes the act of writing takes one’s thinking in an unexpected direction.

Sometimes a gaping hole in one's reasoning becomes apparent. Sometimes one is delighted at knowing more than one thought. Thus, think piece authors can gain insights into their own thinking through their willingness to put their thoughts in writing.

Those who argue that conversation, not writing, is their primary mode of coming to know may be glossing over an important aspect of think pieces--namely they provide a stable text that makes one's private thinking more accessible for public deliberation. This shift from private to public deliberation occurs as think pieces are shared and discussed. Thus, writing does not circumvent the process of coming to know through conversation, rather it becomes a way of capturing how one's thinking has evolved through conversation. Think pieces are meant to be written and rewritten. Each successive draft becomes a vehicle for incorporating meaningful ideas and insights that the author has gained from the conversations about her/his work. When successive drafts are shared over time, those who invest in conversations with the author can see how their engagement has contributed to her/his thinking. While this may be of little consequence to many, contributing to the development of others' thinking is often a major source of satisfaction for educators.

### **What does a Think Piece look like?**

Because think pieces are as much a reflection of one's thought process as an expression of one's ideas, there is no standard or uniform format for a think piece. This point is well illustrated by the think pieces in this collection, which vary considerably in style of writing, in length, and in elaboration of ideas. In terms of style, the one commonality is the personal stance, voice and tone of the authors. In other words, each of us is writing from personal experience and trying to convey a sense of that experience. We are not claiming an objective, depersonalized understanding of study groups. Nor are we claiming to make generalizations about all study groups. Most importantly, we are not offering prescriptive, how-to, formulas or guidelines for organizing or conducting study groups. Hopefully, the information we share will raise issues that others may want to address if they are considering the formation of a study group. Beyond this, however, we are trying to share the ways in which we think about our study group experiences.

Variations in our ways of thinking help to explain the variations in styles of writing. Lynn Richards and Cindy Tananis, for example, have written personal narratives, weaving their thoughts about the study group, into a chronological account of their coming to learn discursively. Pam Krakowski, also writing in a personal narrative style, offers a preliminary vignette of a more informal professional study group and indicates how she would evolve it into a think piece. Marilyn Llewellyn uses the notion of contemplation as a way of describing both her "call" to study and her mode of writing. Her sensitivity to the nuances of language and the power of language to shape contexts for learning is reflected in her thinking about the origin and meanings of words. Think pieces by Kathy Ceroni, Marge Logsdon, and Maria Piantanida are written in the style of personal essays, focusing and elaborating on a core theme. Micheline Stabile's think piece, is an example of an incipient heuristic, a distillation of key points about an experience and a journal article that she can later revisit and develop more fully as time permits. Noreen Garman's think piece is more expository in style, using insights she has gained through

involvement in the Study Group to help students acclimate to this type of learning community within an academic setting.

Hopefully the variations in writing help to underscore one aspect of think pieces that can be very liberating. Rather than having to fit one's ideas into a prescribed format (e.g., academic research paper, journal article, lesson plan, committee report), think pieces allow authors to record their ideas in a way that is compatible with their thought processes. Once the ideas have come into clearer focus and the author has a stronger sense of what she/he wants to make of the ideas, the format and style of writing can change to accommodate external requirements. Initially, however, think pieces afford authors the freedom to get their ideas out and on paper in whatever way feels most comfortable and natural.

To understand variations in length and elaboration of the think pieces that follow, it may be helpful for readers to know about the process used to generate this document. When the possibility of sharing our Study Group experience with the School Performance Network (SPN) was raised, those who were interested in this opportunity began to meet and brainstorm ideas. As the conversation evolved, it became clear that everyone had had experiences not just with our Dissertation/Writing Study Group, but with other groups as well. The suggestion was made that those who wanted to might write a reflection on "study groups I have known and loved--or not." Before our next meeting, almost everyone had written a reflective vignette which, when viewed together, began to lay out a range of experiences--some positive, some not so positive--that we have had with academic, work-related, and informal professional groups.

At that point, the possibility of developing the vignettes into think pieces began to emerge, and some members of the group made a commitment to do this writing. Others, because of work-related obligations or immersion in the dissertation process, regretfully said they would not be able to continue working on their pieces. Over the summer, a core group began to redraft our vignettes into think pieces. As we circulated and critiqued each others' work, a theme began to emerge--the experience of being invited to join the Dissertation/Writing Study Group. When this theme was translated into a working title for the document we had committed to preparing for the School Performance Network, we were able to begin honing our individual think pieces and to imagine what the overall document might look like.

During several meetings, we would look through our file folders and encounter the pieces written by group members who had had to opt out of what we had come to call the Study Group on Study Group project. Each time we would say, "It's too bad we can't include this piece. Even though it isn't finished, it provides an important perspective or reflects a different type of group experience." With a proverbial blinding glimpse of the obvious, it suddenly occurred to us that as a collection of think pieces, the document for the SPN could include pieces in varying stages of elaboration and completion. We asked the authors of these more embryonic pieces if they might do some minor formatting changes and perhaps add a paragraph at the beginning in order to indicate what the piece represents. Graciously they agreed.

So this collection contains some pieces that are essentially an initial, spontaneous draft and others that have gone through three, four or five revisions. All are characterized as think pieces, because we would want to connect our more personal writing to broader educational discourses

on professional education and study groups before viewing them as publishable articles. Because taking our writing to this next level exceeds the scope of work to which we could commit ourselves, we have included an annotated bibliography on study groups for two reasons. One it illustrates the types of literature we would draw upon in subsequent rounds of writing. Two, it may prove useful to readers who themselves would like to deepen their thinking about study groups as a vehicle for professional development.

### **How does one read a think piece?**

As indicated above, a major purpose served by think pieces is as a focal point for thoughtful discussion. Ideally, reading and responding to a think piece benefits both reader and author. Readers of think pieces may be challenged by encountering new ideas or perspectives; they may be reassured by visiting familiar terrain; they may feel affirmed or may be stimulated to express their own views; they may be encouraged to embark on their own inquiries. These are just a few possibilities of what one may gain from a reading and discussing a think piece. Conversely, what might a reader contribute to a think piece author? The answer to this question lies, in part, with the nature of the relationship between reader and author. If they have no connection other than through a shared text, a mutually beneficial exchange is unlikely. If they have only occasional contact, if they are essentially strangers, then a reader may serve as a “trial audience,” letting an author know how his/her ideas are coming across to others. Have they successfully communicated what they intended; has their message missed the mark; have they overlooked an important point? This type of “read” can be extremely important to a think piece author, but we want to address what can be gained when think pieces are discussed by individuals with a shared intellectual history.

Within our Dissertation/Writing Study Group, members have been together over a long period of time--some for more than a decade. This might raise questions about the quality of responses we give to each other—e.g., when we know someone for so long, don't we tend to go easy on them; wouldn't we want to avoid hurt feelings by being less critical; wouldn't saving face take precedence over honesty? Certainly these are potential pitfalls. What helps us to guard against them is a deep commitment to what the study group represents as an intellectual community. Our overarching purpose for being together is to learn from and with each other. This provides a milieu for intellectual intensity. We have a sense of each other's intellectual interests and learning agendas. We know where others have begun a particular conceptual journey. We sense each other's blind spots and are aware of each other's areas of expertise. Most of all we come to know what group members are striving to accomplish, what conceptual puzzles they are grappling with. Therefore, useful responses to think pieces are not bland reassurances, superficial praise, mechanical editing for punctuation and grammar (although at times we do this), or pronouncements of agreement or disagreement with the another's views. Rather, useful responses entail a willingness to engage with each other's conceptual puzzles--to ask insightful questions; to probe the implications of a statement or position; to offer points and counterpoints for an emerging argument; to suggest lines of reasoning that might be explored; to recall an idea that seems to have been lost; to suggest bodies of discourse that might be relevant; to restate or reframe an issue for clarification; to share (often in writing) what thoughts, feelings and insights another's work has evoked in us.

In drafting the think pieces for this collection, we have tried to convey a flavor of what this type of intellectual engagement has meant to us in terms of our personal and professional growth. Certain themes recur throughout the essays, but each author provides her own unique perspective, not only of the rewards of such learning, but also of the demands. Our intent is not to proselytize for study groups as the only or best form of professional development. We do, however, want to challenge the functionalist notion that “study group” is simply another technique for professional development that can be easily packaged and delivered, or worse, imposed upon teachers. While we are the first to acknowledge that study groups as we portray them in the following think pieces may not appeal to everyone, we hope that those who are intrigued by the idea of study groups will gain a clearer sense of issues that merit attention as educators consider entering into this mode of professional development. For those who decide to pursue this option, we hope their experience is energizing, rewarding and productive.

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## **On Becoming a Study Group:**

A Think Piece

Noreen B. Garman, Ph.D.

Group discussion, as a learning process, has a longstanding history in American education. So, too, does the use of small groups. Planning groups, task groups, recitation groups, cooperative learning groups, collaborative learning groups, problem-based learning groups, project teams, ad-hoc committees---variation on the theme of "educational groups" is almost limitless. Why then, is there an emerging interest in "study groups" both as a pedagogical strategy for promoting student learning and as a professional development strategy for teacher renewal and growth? Is the concept of "study group" merely the most recent repackaging of a well worn educational device?

Over the years of teaching I have organized various small group efforts, including study groups and worked with educators in professional development study groups. Most significant for me is my role in a unique study group that has continued, with different members, for over two decades. In my experience, a study group is a very different body than a task group, or a planning group, which focuses on specific actions and results. Members of these groups work to achieve the task or the plan. Members of a study group, on the other hand, are committed to the process of reading, investigation and reflection in an attempt to obtain a deeper understanding of something by methodical and exhaustive efforts. It should be noted that all small group efforts include aspects of "study" in order to achieve their purpose. "Study," as the express purpose of a study group, implies the zealous endeavor of each member to engage in detailed examination of the topics at hand. Study groups convene regularly to exchange ideas, to engage in deliberative discourse in order to generate collective knowledge

At the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education, one department has required all doctoral students to pass a two term course, known in the folklore of the Administrative and Policy Studies Department as the "Core Experience" (See the APS Core Syllabus for details.) Much of the work in the Core is carried on through study groups, with a team of three faculty and one graduate assistant overseeing the various activities. Over the years the Core Instructional Team has recognized that small groups need time to develop, to evolve into productive study groups. Groups, like individuals, seem to have a distinctive personality, almost magically created from a unique mix of qualities. We struggle to consider how we can help the groups progress from a contrived bunch of individuals to authentic study groups and toward what Garman, in the 1982 ASCD Yearbook (p.48), calls "involvements with organic reciprocity."

The text below is an attempt on the part of the Instructional Team to begin articulating a language and mode of operating that might be helpful without being prescriptive. This Think Piece is hopefully a way for groups to recognize at what point they might think of themselves as productive study groups rather than interesting discussion groups. We acknowledge the promises and pitfalls and the struggle that is an inherent part of becoming a study group.

## Why Study Groups?

What are the reasons why we've organized the Core to focus the learning through study groups? Although we've acted with several tacit assumptions, we lay out the principles that are guiding our curriculum here:

First, current thinking about the nature of learning suggests that knowledge is socially constructed. Educators recognize the significant (and elusive) relationship between individual and social structures in determining how humans come to know their world. And although we recognize that reality is individual and each one of us interprets (and thereby constructs) knowledge individually, we are continually influenced by our social structures. The study group provides a social structure to maximize learning through deliberative discourse.

Second, the field of education assumes collaboration. In other words, in education we formalize group learning. Whether in large lectures, seminars, collaborative small groups, or electronic instruction, we come together in formal settings to learn. Curriculum is the educator's way to "contrive" learning experiences for groups.

Third, in this age of information explosion, the individual is limited in what he/she can "know" and even explore. Having the capacity for expanding diverse resources, the study group extends the intellectual potential of a single individual.

Fourth, study groups are organized so that learners can engage in an educative experience by developing a keener sense of agency, in other words, becoming agents of their own learning.

Fifth, there is a current interest in the study group as a vehicle for professional development of teachers and administrators. The study group approach provides educators with a comprehensive and communal way for them to critically reflect on, as well to advance, their practice.

## When a Study Group?

If, indeed, we are hoping that groups will evolve into study groups, then we asked ourselves, "When does a study group manifest itself?" and how do we begin to describe what we mean? In our deliberations we started to offer some ideas. We were surprised at how many points we shared and how we were able to embellish the descriptors with our own work with study groups over the years.

## **STUDY GROUP MEMBERS AS POTENTIAL RESOURCES TO ONE ANOTHER:**

We continue to assume that mature educators serve as rich resources to one another in working groups. In part it is because they bring with them two very important proclivities:

For one, group members embody diverse backgrounds which include cultural and practice-based experiences. Within the discussions these are often shared as personal stories. These narratives often provide the context for deliberation as well as interesting new knowledge for many in the group who have not shared the cultural or practice experiences of other members.

Perhaps most important, mature educators bring their curiosity and capacity for learning. This means that a group member brings her/his ability and energy to reason, to inquire, to interpret, to argue, to critique, to theorize...and above all, the desire to push the bounds of one's "everyday" intellectual activity. A member also brings the capacity to care about others, to find compassion in judgments and to see the humor, irony and inconsistencies in the human condition generally. These "capacities" are but a few that serve as the wellspring of energy for the study group deliberations.

### **STUDY GROUP MEMBERS SHARE A COMMON WILL:**

Although group members embody the rich capacities mentioned above, they may, for whatever reason, lack the will to bring them to the group. Thus, we generated the following imperatives that might allow these capacities to develop into personal commitments and eventually into a group commitment.

#### **•• willingness to engage in the shared learning of the group members.**

Educators talk a lot these days about "engagement" as a critical characteristic of learning. Among other things, it means being present . The notion of "being present" has both a literal and figurative meaning.

In literal terms "being present" means physically sharing the same time and space with an understanding that when one is not there, even for a short period of time, the group suffers. There is a group rupture, and in some cases a serious violation, that diminishes the group's energy and potential.

Being there, in figurative terms, means being connected. Members are willing, not only to listen, but also to struggle to understand and extend the individual and group deliberations.

#### **••• willingness to risk.**

In educational literature risk is often associated with deliberative discourse (and knowledge generating.) However, it's tough to share a tenuous idea that hasn't been well thought-out or documented (which, for many of us, happens daily.) Yet, some of the most powerful insights can come from the stance and counterstance that we take as we exchange (often contradict) ideas. In doing so we run the risk of sounding naive, uninformed, or even downright foolish.

In challenging others, we risk being thought of as inconsiderate, arrogant, even heartless. Thus groups, when they first come together, often attempt to establish harmony by, what Goffman (1967) calls “working acceptance” (p.11). The prevailing mood is politeness, in which members strive to “save face” for themselves and others, while at the same time, some members are attempting to establish their identities through self promotion. (It may be that there is a delicate balance between self-promoting and sharing of self.)

As groups continue to evolve, members begin to feel more secure and their contributions may not be seen so much as high risk responses. Most important, group members begin to feel as if they can deal with one another “honestly,” transcending the tendencies to save face or give lip service to ideas. Thus, one important characteristic of a study group is authenticity.

### **•• willingness to struggle for balanced participation.**

When diverse groups first form, often the participation is uneven. Some members initiate the discussion, some are willing to add to a topic (even though they are not particularly interested), and some remain relatively silent. As members feel more confident in the discussion, the balance may change. In a study group, members are concerned about “focused dialogue”. Each member is conscious of his/her responsibility to initiate, to give responses, to ask, to clarify and challenge, to summarize, etc. Balanced participation means that members work to create spaces so that the group is productive for all.

### **•• willingness to care about the health of the group**

As group members develop mutual respect for one another, through patience and curiosity they become interested in the topics and ideas of others that may not seem to relate to their own. Study group members recognize that the health of the group has a direct relationship to the quality of their own work.

### **•• willingness to push intellectual reasoning to insightful and theoretic levels.**

This is a central quality of study groups. Task groups and planning groups deliberate for the purpose of accomplishing a common product. The purpose of the study group is to advance knowledge by drawing on the learning resources of the group. In order to carry on productive deliberations, each member is obliged to come to the discussion prepared to grapple with challenging ideas. This often requires more than a first reading of the article(s) under discussion. It may even require members at times to consult other resources in order to help interpret the topic as framed. The journal is one vehicle for members to “think in writing” for the sake of the group deliberations.

## **HOW STUDY GROUP MEMBERS DEMONSTRATE THEIR COMMITMENT**

As we discussed the qualities of a study group, we realized the importance of the commitment that study group members develop as they live out their time together. We also realize that the ways groups act on their commitments are complex processes. We have only a few suggestions

to offer here, with the hope that groups will continue to monitor their processes and add to the insights about study group potential.

- At some point early in their discussions, the study group members begin to develop their own agreements about how they will work together; e.g. how they will manage time, energies of each member, and how they will provide for the balance of the group and readjust when the group seems uneven. The agreements include an assumption that all members will be productive. If there are members who are not contributing equitably, the group will not ignore (or cover), but rather find ways to address the inequity.

- Ideas and topics for the group have a broad enough relevance so that all members can find meaning in what they are discussing. This is difficult to accomplish when the discussion continues to focus on stories from group members' own experience, although this is a vital context to begin to generate ideas and insights. The Core Team encourages individuals to draw on their practice experiences for their studies. However, this means that members with significant stories need to be aware of the need to push to a more general "so what" of their narratives.

- We have emphasized that scholarly reasoning and theorizing are possible to practice in study groups. The notion of "theorizing" may sound a bit too lofty at first, however, it would be important to ask, "What do we mean by theorizing?" Theories are, after all, ways to explain or interpret the events (or phenomenon) under study. Theories are often expressed as concepts.

- We are also hoping that groups will understand the meaning of "framing issues" and "multiple perspectives" as related to scholarly reasoning. Each study group member has a role in this important accomplishment. Group members not only offer information, they also "represent" perspectives. People represent ideas and, as study group members share ideas, they become embodiments of ideas and perspectives for other members to understand and reflect. This kind of understanding can come only if members are willing to suspend judgment of the "right and wrong" of the idea expressed by another. Members are encouraged, at appropriate times, to move beyond the "I agree or disagree with you" to a place of hearing the perspective that the other might represent.

- Study group members also have a good opportunity to consider the meanings of critique as well as scholarly argument and, in practicing various forms of reasoning, to get feedback from their colleagues. In addition, the ability to critique another's writing is important for one's own scholarship.

## **CHALLENGES:**

As we generated the ideas presented in this piece, we recognized how tough the challenges are!! It's quite an accomplishment when groups actually become authentic study groups. It takes time and hard work. Yet we are convinced a study group can provide a context for mutual respect and trust that can create the potential for authentic intellectual struggle...or it can be a contrived unit where some members feel constrained in their individual learning. In any case, we hope the effort is productive and worth the struggle.

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*A Journey to Discursive Learning: A Think Piece on “Study” and Learning*  
Cynthia A. Tananis, Ed.D.

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 caricatured 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.<sup>3</sup> The experience brought me to an even deeper reconceptualizing and embodiment of learning in community with colleagues.

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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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.

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## **The Study Group as a Framework for Self guided Professional Development Within School Settings: A Think Piece**

Micheline Stabile, Ed.D

In the early 1990's I was asked to develop and lead an Instructional Support Initiative for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. In exchange for revamping a failing project that had been wrought with political conflict and dissention I was given the rare opportunity to examine and act upon my ideals of educational leadership with a relatively free reign. Educational leadership according to my ideals is perhaps best described as "pedagogical and educative" rather than managerial. Therefore I have consistently considered one of my greatest challenges and responsibilities as to engage the project teachers with me in meaningful professional development pursuits. Though we have not named it as such, I believe that our team efforts in self guided professional development could be considered a "study group."

Within this think piece I briefly describe the nature of self guided professional development experiences within the context of this project, and I begin to lay out some thoughts about the kind of educational leadership that I believe must underpin such endeavors.

### **Features of the Project Study Group**

Through the years our project team has consisted of 7-11 members including myself. At the beginning of each school year we meet as a group to identify common areas of professional development interest. Based upon these common interests we, as a group, decide upon a staff development theme for the year. These themes are purposefully very broad to allow for a variety of pursuits. One day a week is normally devoted to project planning and development. Each month we designate one half of these days to our professional development as a group. The days for the entire year are determined in September. Often our sessions take place off site in a place that serves lunch. Each member takes responsibility for organizing, planning, and leading one of the monthly sessions. We create an ongoing team portfolio of products that is presented at the end of the school year to the head of our department. After the formal presentation of our portfolio, our tradition has been to celebrate our growth with an end of the year luncheon.

Our study themes have included:

- Group Dynamics (two years)
- Team Building and Team Maintenance
- Professional Collaboration
- Issues Related to Gifted Education
- Issues Related to Urban Education and what is referred to as the "achievement gap"
- Computer Skill Development Graphic Programs
- Computer Skill Development: Tasks we can do with Word, Excel, Data base

The following are some thoughts that come to mind related to this "study group" experiences:

- ? Self Guided Professional development is truly valued by I, the "administrator," who creates a space in the system for such an endeavor.

- ? By self guided I mean that the group study agenda is determined internally by the group rather than prescribed administratively
- ? Study group times are predetermined well in advance and are strictly adhered to by all no matter how many other time demands arise.
- ? All study group members participate as equals with no one person privileged as the overall expert or leader.
- ? Each member participates in decisions about what we will study in other words there is no predetermined study agenda.
- ? Everyone shares responsibility for organizing and leading ie forming the agenda, picking a location, bringing in outside speakers, articles etc.
- ? An ongoing difficulty is that the group makeup is predetermined. All of the participants would not necessarily choose one another as study cohorts.
- ? Since the group meets during work time participation is by and large mandatory. One year a project member who was having difficulty relating to team members elected half way through the year not to participate in the group dynamics study deeming it “a waste of time.” He was severely ostracized by the rest of the group.
- ? Negative dynamics that arise from “working together” tend to bleed over into “studying together.” Conversely, positive dynamics that stem from studying together can enhance working together.
- ? The creation of products in the form of a portfolio lends legitimacy within the system to our self directed professional development efforts.
- ? I think the change in location away from the work site, the formal group portfolio presentation, and the end of year celebration are all important rituals that enhance the “study group” nature of our experience
- ?

### **“Pedagogical/ Educative” Leadership**

In a departure from a more traditional “managerial” framework the notion of “pedagogical”/ “educative” leadership is described within critical discourses in educational administration literature. The point of departure for the educative/pedagogical approach to educational administration lies in the different view it espouses of school people. The American social philosopher Brian Fay (1977) has described educative leadership in the following way,

Rather than regarding them as untrustworthy and needing to be controlled by tight bureaucratic structures, an educative view of leadership starts from the presumption that people in schools are conscious of themselves as active deciding beings, bearing responsibility for their choices and able to explain them by referring to their own purposes, ideas, and beliefs. (Fay, 1977, p. 229)

While not new, this view of leadership is understandably at odds with the conventional view, which is more concerned with “influencing individuals and groups towards goal achievement (Smyth, 1989, p. 191).” Smyth who has explicated the notion of pedagogical”/”educative” leadership describes the difference as having to do with the democratic and participative formulation of goals versus the unquestioning acceptance and pursuit of pre-specified goals (p.

191). Smyth's views of educative/pedagogical leadership would seem to exemplify the kind of context within which study group can flourish. Some examples of his ideas are reflected in the following quotes:

(Smyth, 1989, p. 179)

If schools are to be the inquiring kinds of places we would want them to be, then the values espoused and the activities pursued will be as a consequence of dialogue about the nature of schooling and what is considered important in the development of children, and not as a result of bureaucratic or autocratic decree.

The idea presented in this chapter do not, therefore, conform with those generally addressed when matters of educational leadership are canvassed. ...There are no prescriptive indicators on how people in leadership positions should think or act in particular circumstances. What is presented instead is an argument about a way people in school settings might actively assist one another in uncovering meaning in what they do, while investing in them the capacity to change, improve and transform those practices

(Smyth, 1989, p. 187)

It is interesting to speculate on how it maybe possible to redirect thinking away from a despondent view of teachers and their capabilities, towards more productive possibilities. One possibility lies in reconstruing the way those 'outside' schools are prepared to view the work of teachers. Elaz for one, claims that in official circles at least a relatively low value is placed on experiential knowledge which is such an important part of the teachers' status and value of their own knowledge, but they receive little in the way of encouragement to view themselves as originators of knowledge both culturally and socially. According to Ebaz (1981)the view of teachers as lacking in knowledge is, I believe, mistaken and misleading, and has maintained credibility partly because of conceptions of...teaching through which teachers have been viewed. Once these conceptions are suspended, a very different picture of teachers' knowledge comes to the fore. (p. 45)

Available evidence suggests that teachers do in fact have stable bodies of ideas about how and what to teach and that their ways of thinking and dialoguing about the issues are rational, at least in their terms.

(Smyth, 1989, p. 190)

Articulating a form of leadership that is more empowering of followers means moving considerably beyond the traits, characteristics and situations in which standard views of leadership are contingent. It entails a preparedness to incorporate all school participants in an active and inclusive process of questioning, challenging and theorizing about the social, political and cultural nature of the work of schools.

(Smyth, 1989, p. 191)

...leadership can spring from anywhere; it is not a quality that comes with an office or a person. Rather, it derives from the context and ideas of individuals who influence each other. Thus, a principal may at times be a leader and at other times, a follower. A

teacher may be a leader, and the principal a follower. Leadership is an act bounded in space and time; it is an act that enables others and allows them, in turn to become enablers (p. 187)

It would seem that ideas such as these can provide a rationale for the Study Group as a framework for self guided professional development within school settings. For as Smyth observes,

If leadership has little to do with hierarchical impositions, then it has a lot to do with enabling the 'best' ideas to emerge wherever they come from, through a process of informed and rational debate. (Smyth, 1989, p. 191)

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**A Study Group I Have Known and Loved:  
A Think Piece in Progress**  
Pam Krakowski

***Introductory remarks***

I wrote the following vignette in response to the study group asking us to write about our experience(s) with “study groups we had known.” It remains a vignette and has not progressed to being a think piece, because I am in the process of writing my dissertation and therefore am focusing all of my attention on accomplishing that goal. In this written document, I include a few introductory comments, the vignette, and what I would do next with the vignette if I were to develop a think piece.

As an artist-teacher, my natural response to a writing request is to give form to experience through writing a narrative account. Once I see my ideas and experiences in some visible, storied form, then I can reflect more thoughtfully on the meaning of the experience. In this particular vignette, I write about an ongoing experience with a group of art teachers. We have met monthly for the past five years. Although we do not formally consider ourselves a study group, in my opinion, the group functions in many ways as a (loosely-defined) study group, providing each member with personal and professional support and growth. Our desire to keep the group informal, spontaneous, fluid, and personal reflects our individual modes of relating and our artistic inclinations.

(Note: I have used pseudonyms for the members of the study group and their respective schools, with the exception of myself).

***Vignette: Art teachers creating a space for sharing and support***

*It all began when Jackie landed her first elementary art teaching job at Fair Oaks. We were all more or less teaching the summer ARTexpress classes at the Carnegie Museum. At the end of the last week of classes, as we were putting away materials, Jackie pulled a few of us aside and said, “I start teaching next week and I’m scared to death. Would you mind getting together at my place—I’ll serve us food—and tell me what to expect on the first day.” So Katie, Lucy, Jessie, Marcy, Jackie, and myself, met the following week in Jackie’s living room, munching on all of her food, sharing our stories and memories of our “first day of school.” We had entered into a dialogue that resembled what Shubert and Ayers (1992) named teacher lore.*

*I remember from the very beginning being fascinated by what was starting to unfold over the next few hours. Individually and collectively we shared personal anecdotes—some humorous, some touching—but mostly disastrous accounts about our first day, first week, and even first year experiences of teaching art. Part of our intent was to demystify the “big first day.” The other part was to encourage Jackie with the assurance that once you got to know your students and the school, you would just “know” what to do. We talked about other things—what was going on in our personal lives, our art making, and upcoming exhibitions. We also brought examples of art projects we had done with children at the museum or in our schools. By the end*

*of the evening (we had begun in the afternoon and stayed past dinnertime), we already had a group joke that could be summarized in the question, “And where did you find those recycled materials?”*

*Our identity as a group was well established before we met at Jackie’s house. We had taught together at the museum for at least six years. We all had been influenced by Bay Hallowell, the curator of education for the children’s programs and our mentor. We shared a somewhat similar philosophy of museum education. We all experienced the Friday afternoon meetings where we discussed in detail what we had taught that week, including the books we used, the artwork we visited, the questions we asked. We also talked about how we engaged the children, how we got our ideas, how we began our lessons, how we ended. And—it all occurred sitting on little chairs around a table of food in the middle of the children’s studio.*

*At Jackie’s house our evening had come to an end. We all agreed that it was refreshing and pleasurable to come together. “We have to do this again,” we agreed. We were glad that Jackie was scared out of her mind, because why else would we have thought to meet. We thanked her. After assuring Jackie that she was going to have many more problems and that she needed us, we decided we should meet again next month. We marked in our calendars our next date, reminding each other to bring examples of what we did during the first weeks of school—and of course, we added, “Don’t forget to bring something to eat.”*

*We began to meet once a month, at each other’s houses, bringing art projects to share and discuss. Sometimes we brought problem projects and got advice on where to go next, and sometimes we talked about student or school relationships. Sometimes we met at coffee shops when we were too busy to cook, and sometimes we ate out. We talked about bringing our personal artwork, and we talked about having a time to make art together—although we have never gone in those directions. This past year we began to visit each other’s art room spaces for our meetings. Sometimes we had an agenda—i.e. “let’s bring stuff on assessment next month”—but most of the time we went with the flow.*

*We have been meeting now for more than five years. The group constellation has changed. Lucy went back to school, Jessie moved to Arizona, and Mary had a baby and moved away as well. Since then, Lisa and Annie have joined the group. Lisa joined when she left the Carnegie to take an art teaching position at The Carlton School, and Annie, who we also knew from the museum, began her first art position in two elementary schools in the Shaker school district. We all were able to support each other as we weathered the shock of teaching in the “real world.” After having taught in the ideal world of the museum, where art making and talking about art were authentic and naturally occurring events, we could resonate with Goodlad (1984), who stated, “A funny thing happens to the arts...on their way to the classroom.”*

*For now our group identity seems stable—Jackie, Katie, Lisa, Annie, and myself. Jackie no longer teaches elementary art at Fair Oaks. She is at the high school, sharing a ceramic studio space with a man whom we all believe is a hazard to society. Katie, the most liberal of us, teaches art, 5th through 8th grade at St. Andrew’s Academy—which we have since renamed “the home for the young Republicans.” Lisa, as I mentioned earlier, teaches at Carlton—currently 5th through 8th grade, whose situation is so ideal that it makes us all sick. Annie has begun her*

*second year at Shaker. Compared to us all, she has the most challenging situation, doing the work of a full time art teacher, but being paid part time. And I am at Falk.*

*We have never officially named ourselves a study group. As artists we were averse to the idea of putting a name on it—for fear it would destroy our freedom and the possibilities of what we could be. The one time I suggested that we call ourselves a study group I received looks of disapproval and furrowed brows. At times we call ourselves our “art group.” At other times we call ourselves our little group. But most of the time we don’t call ourselves anything. For the past five years we have chosen to be nameless.*

### ***The Next Step: From Vignette to Think Piece***

If I were to write a think piece around this vignette, what direction would I have gone? First, I think that I would have written two other short vignettes—one on my participation with an early childhood study group that met to discuss the Reggio approach in relation to each member’s own practice, and the other on my participation with the dissertation writing study group. After I had made my thinking visible through these three vignettes, then I would have written a think piece that addressed some of the common themes embedded in the vignettes as well as the different roles each study group played in my personal and professional growth.

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**Studying At the Table**  
**Nourishment for the Professional Self**  
A Think Piece on Study Groups

Lynn A. Richards, Ed. D.

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>4</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.

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<sup>4</sup> A pseudonym.

### 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 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 & 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>5</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,

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<sup>5</sup> Also a pseudonym.

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 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>6</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

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<sup>6</sup> A pseudonym.

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,

and

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 preciously-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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## **A Call to Study and Contemplative Space A Think Piece**

Marilyn J. Llewellyn, Ph. D.

### **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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**Searching for Professional Fulfillment:  
My Journey to Study Group**

A Think Piece

Kathleen M. Ceroni, Ph. D.

***Point of Departure***

At this stage in my professional career, I am considered a veteran teacher, having taught high school English for a span of twenty-eight years. During that time, my colleagues and I have been engaged in “being about the *business* of teaching” (a phrase my current principal often uses to praise us). With pride I can say we are, for the most part, successful in achieving our goal, in spite of organizational, political, and economic constraints that can and do distract from the “business” the institution claims to “be about,” that we do a good job, even an outstanding job, with the task entrusted to us, remaining focused and committed to serving the needs of the students who pass through our classrooms.

But early in my career, a need not being met at my site of practice began to tug at me. It was a need to understand and stay connected with my evolving teacher self; it was a need for collegial interactions; it was a need for substantive, “thick talk” about our work and the thinking processes attendant to it. As my dissatisfaction grew, so too, did my sense of isolation. This isolation was magnified each time I sat through a committee meeting focused on a specifically imposed administrative agenda tied to items of business and each time a bell interrupted an on-the-run conversation about practice a colleague and I had begun while waiting in line to use the xerox machine. It happened each time I found myself racing from student to student, meeting to meeting, and one crisis to another. In short, my normal teaching day in an institutional setting designed and organized to “be about the business of teaching,” left me feeling unfulfilled and lonely as a teaching professional.

***Mapping the Course that Lead Me to the Study Group Table***

The impetus to act on addressing my discontent ultimately began when my district initiated a school wide staff development program, mandating the use of the Madeline Hunter Model, a fundamentally linear, lock step approach to teaching and learning. The relative freedom I had had in my own classroom to generate dialogue, reflection, and intellectual engagement with my students was what had been sustaining and nourishing me within a broader, institutional context that was sapping my energy and enthusiasm. Stripped of that freedom, my professional discontent deepened and I abandoned any hope of finding the fulfillment I was seeking in the place where I enacted my teaching. At that point, I enrolled in graduate school.

For the next ten years attending evening and summer courses at Pitt provided me with an outlet for intellectual stimulation, collegial interactions, and substantive talk that refueled and reenergized my evolving professional self. Even though the conditions at the site of my daily practice remained the same, the graduate school experience alleviated some of the isolation I felt there and helped me to better manage the discontent I experienced. It also engendered in me a

sense of personal and professional agency to risk becoming an advocate for teacher initiated school reform.

Traveling two paths simultaneously, my daily teaching path and my graduate school path had, indeed, proved mutually beneficial. Each made the other more satisfying and together provided both the personal and professional enrichment I was seeking. So when my graduate school path came to an end, the dread of not having what it had provided began to loom before me. Fortunately, an ancillary path was presented to me when Noreen Garman invited me to become a member of her dissertation study group.

### **At the Table: My Study Group Experience**

From the beginning, joining the study group was a joyful event and a natural progression from my graduate school experience. Here, though, unlike graduate school classes, there was no teacher and no assigned readings, projects, or papers. Here I assumed responsibility for designing and engaging in an inquiry of my own choosing. The freedom and sense of agency I felt to control my own learning energized me in powerful ways. The study group table provided a space and an open-ended time frame for me to experience and re-experience at each group meeting a discursive, deliberative process with others who shared a similar desire to pursue scholarly interests. Over time, as the process imprinted on me, I became adept at thinking critically and reflectively. I learned to examine ideas from multiple perspectives as I listened to others making their thinking visible through oral and print texts. I learned to use writing as a means of discovery, to take intellectual risks, and to accept and embrace ambiguity. For the first time I was claiming ownership of my own learning independent of any institutional setting. This marked a turning point in my search for personal and professional fulfillment.

The transformational power of the study group experience is created and fueled by members both individually and collectively. I go to the study group table voluntarily, intrinsically motivated by my desire for self-growth and professional renewal. But at the table, my thinking is strengthened in and through collaboration with others. The synergistic nature of the group propels me to shape, revise, and extend ideas in ways I could never achieve on my own. Given this, an intellectual intimacy has developed among the members based on trust and mutual respect for academic rigor. Thus, when my worth as a scholar is affirmed at the table, so too is the collective worth of the scholarship of every other member and of the group. I leave the study group table to return to my school setting, energized and empowered by the experience.

### **Returning to the Site of Practice**

Throughout my graduate school years and the intervening years since I have been an active study group member, some changes have occurred at my school. The Hunter Model has “come and gone,” its use no longer mandated by my district. My building has been renovated so after twenty-five years of teaching in a windowless room, I now teach in a room with natural light. Computer labs have been installed and courses in Informational Science and Industrial Arts Technology have been added to the curriculum. We even have a female principal, which is a first in the district’s history.

These changes, however, have not, for the most part altered how we “go about the business of teaching.” The current focus of business seems to be on aligning the curriculum with state standards, raising test scores, and accruing and managing Act 48 credits and hours. What’s missing though, is any in-place program designed to foster collaboration among teachers with designated time set aside for us to engage in discursive deliberation about pedagogical and professional issues we deem important. What’s missing is a valuing of teachers taking charge of their own professional development through active learning and its potential to positively impact student learning.

In short, the site of my practice has not changed in ways fundamental and important to me, but I have changed and continue to change. Because of my on-going involvement with study group, I seldom experience those feelings of professional isolation and discontent so strongly felt in the years before I became a member. The intellectual nourishment and professional affirmation I receive at the study group table enriches my classroom practice and my interactions with students and colleagues. Having the study group experience sustains me in my daily teaching and engenders in me a renewed faith in the potential of teachers to transform the profession through collaborative inquiry. My search for professional fulfillment lead me to the study group table, and now, like Emily Dickinson, “I dwell in possibility--.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest Emily Dickinson’s Poems* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. 166.

**Study Group: Engaging Multiple “Selves”**  
Marjorie Logsdon, Ph.D.

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.

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**An Invitation I Couldn't Refuse--What Makes "The Study Group" Work for Me**  
A Think Piece  
Maria Piantanida, Ph.D.

**Introduction**

In 1980, I had finished all of the course work for my doctoral program, and the time had come to begin the dissertation. At this pivotal moment in my educational journey, my advisor and mentor, Dr. Noreen Garman, extended an invitation I couldn't refuse. Let me be clear. In no way was I forced to accept her invitation. Rather, the opportunity she offered was so exciting there was no way I would miss out on it.

On the face of it, her mildly worded invitation doesn't seem all that galvanizing. "Several of my advisees are ready to work on their dissertations," she said. "I'm thinking about forming a study group to look at alternatives to traditional quantitative research. Would you be interested in participating?" Sometimes, life-altering experiences begin with such unassuming invitations. Accepting the invitation is more an act of faith than a reasoned choice among strategies for accomplishing an objective. In the case of Noreen's invitation, I had faith that I would learn through my involvement with the newly forming group and that whatever I learned would be of value to me. I had faith in Noreen, in the other students who were to be part of the group, and in whatever process unfolded.

More than 20 years have passed since I joined "The Study Group." During that time, the Group has evolved through three generations, and I have been an active participant in the first and third.<sup>8</sup> In this think piece, I want to share a little of why I stay involved with the group and address the question, "What makes it work so well for me?" While there are many potential responses to that question, I want to touch on the following:

- o the people;
- o a focus on learning;
- o the ambiance;
- o the structure and the process; and
- o what I am able to give and get.

In the process of reflecting on these aspects of my study group experience, I hope to raise issues that others might consider should they have occasion either to extend or receive "an invitation to study group."

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<sup>8</sup>The first generation Study Group began in 1980 and ended in 1988 when the last member completed her dissertation. The second generation began in 1990 with a new group of students and continued until 1994 or 1995 when most of these students completed their dissertations and moved on. The third generation began to emerge from the second group. Its beginning was marked not so much by the influx of new members as by a subtle shift in the quality of deliberation within the group.

## **The People**

Without a doubt, I remain with the Study Group and find it productive because of the other women who participate in it. It feels a bit odd to talk about “them” as others who are apart from me. My over-riding sense of the Group is always a sense of “we”; not me and them. Yet, the women who constitute the Group do come as individuals, and each one is bright, funny, competent, and committed to her professional work. I always feel uplifted in their company. I always enjoy our conversations. I look forward to the time we spend together.

When I incorporate study groups into courses that I teach, at least one student will inevitably ask, “How important is it that the members of the group have similar interests?” Usually, they associate “similar interests” with circumstantial (and to me superficial) characteristics such as similar work role/title, similar work setting, enrollment in the same educational program, or shared interest in a topic area. The assumption seems to be that having such common interests is a pre-requisite for productive discussions; if others don’t understand “where I’m coming from,” how can they give me useful feedback; if we’re talking about topics tangential to my areas of expertise, what can I offer; if we’re focused on someone else’s work, won’t I be bored? This is a rather impoverished way of thinking about what a study group represents.

From the outset of the Study Group, the diversity represented by group members has enriched our deliberations. Currently, the group includes two high school teachers, three elementary school teachers, six higher education faculty/administrators, two consultants, a public school administrator, and two full-time doctoral students. Our areas of study include English literature and composition, art education, public health, evaluation, international education, adult education, curriculum, and social foundations of education. The focus of our dissertation inquiries range from creative dramatics in elementary school to genetic counseling; from educational inclusion to placement caregiving of patients institutionalized because of Alzheimer’s Disease. The research methods we are studying include narrative, visually arts-based, heuristic, grounded theory, case study, secondary analysis, personal essay, literary criticism, and spiritual inquiry.

What is it about this diversity that works for me? First, I can learn vicariously about ideas, bodies of literature, and writers who are not directly related to my areas of study. This keeps me from developing an overly narrow focus in my thinking; it challenges me to re-examine my assumptions; it gives me fresh outlooks on the world around me. Second, whenever I need to find resources for a particular project, I can turn to the group for recommendations. It is uncanny how often they can point me to just the right source of help when I need it. Third, and most important, I have been challenged and stretched in the ways I make sense of the world. In my more callow youth, I assumed that everyone thought in the same way I did. When I discovered that this wasn’t so, I harbored the rather ego-centric view that my way of thinking was superior. What I’ve learned from the women in the study group is the power of thinking in the form of fictive and non-fictive narratives, visual images, and spiritual meditations. In short, the diversity of the group represents a fertile context for my own learning, and this brings me to an aspect of the group that members do have in common--a passion for learning.

I use the term, “passion,” to convey a sense of intellectual intensity, a fierce engagement with ideas, a zeal for expanding what one knows of oneself and the world. This passion is enacted

through a process of discursive deliberation. I shall return to this point after addressing another aspect of the Study Group, its focus on learning.

### **A Focus on Learning**

As a curriculum consultant, I spend a great deal of my professional life working with groups. In my earlier years as a manager of education in a hospital, I spent a great deal of time working in committees. In my even earlier years as a staff member of a health planning agency, I spent a great deal of time working with community groups. In each case, the purpose of such group work had been to accomplish a task--e.g., plan a curriculum, decide how to evaluate a medical training program, improve the quality of ambulance services. Accomplishing the task often entailed a great deal of learning, which I enjoyed. So I don't want to discount the value of learning associated with work-based, task-oriented study groups. I feel compelled to say, however, that such work-focused learning has a very different valence for me than the learning I do in the Study Group. Learning done in conjunction with my professional responsibilities is, in a sense, utilitarian. It serves a useful purpose and that purpose serves the needs and interests of an organization. Any personal satisfaction or benefit derived from the learning is likely to be tangential, and inconsequential, to the concerns of the organization.

In the Study Group, I engage in learning for my own sake. Occasionally, I may have a specific purpose--like learning what I needed to know in order to complete a dissertation. But most of the time, I have no such end in mind. My commitment is not to accomplishing a goal, but rather to be involved in a community of passionate learners. What I gain from that involvement is most often a surprise. The element of surprise, of serendipity, infuses the Study Group experience with a sense of energy, of generative possibility. I want to stay involved, because I want to see what will happen next. Often I am delighted when the conversation sparks an unexpected reconnection between information I acquired years ago and some matter under current consideration. Just as often, I am amazed when I enter into a whole new line of thinking because of a question raised by someone in the group or a discussion of a thorny dilemma. I am humbled and grateful when someone else's perspective pierces a bubble of certitude and helps me see how my thinking has been too limited or completely off-base.

Since the publication of Malcolm Knowle's book, *The Adult Learner, A Neglected Species*, it has become a cliché of professional development programs to begin by asking participants why they are attending the program and what they hope to get from it. Predicated on the assumption that adults know what they want and want to get that as efficiently as possible, this approach to professional development feels as utilitarian to me as learning in order to better serve the purposes of a work organization. Beyond that, it feels unbearably sterile--a vision of my educational needs grounded in the limitations of my current ignorance and satisfied by others through efficiently delivered "learning" packages.

My learning in the Study Group is predicated, not on a preconceived notion of what I want to know, but rather on faith in the possibility of significant meanings emerging from my intellectual engagement with a deliberative community. I recognize that such faith may be a luxury. I am involved in the Study Group of my own volition. I am answerable to no one but the Group for my investment in it. I am accountable to no one but myself for what I gain from it. When I hear rhetoric linking study groups to professional development initiatives like Pennsylvania's current

Act 48, I cannot help but wonder about the fragility of faith. Assuming an individual educator would have faith in such an organic approach to learning, would a school administrator have enough faith to approve his/her involvement, and would the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) have sufficient faith to see this as a legitimate mode of professional development? I fear not, when I read criteria like the following from the PDE (2000) guidelines for approving professional education programs:

1. Each learning experience is planned in response to an educational need identified by a target audience.
2. Each learning experience has clear, concise, written content- and skill-based competencies. (p. 5)

Such language is rooted in what Schon (1983, 1987) describes as a rational technical approach to education. It is grounded in what Garman (1989) calls a “closed curriculum structure.” It privileges an instrumental view of learning that has been challenged by curriculum theorists (e.g., Applebee, 1996; Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Marshall, Sears & Schubert, 2000; Pinar, 1975; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). My colleague, Cindy, tells me that educators need not be limited by the functionalist wording of the criteria. It is possible, she assures me, to (re)interpret these criteria in a much broader way. Although I hope this is true, it is the mindset reflected in this language that troubles me. It is not a mindset that exudes a faith in the possibilities of learning through engagement in a process.<sup>9</sup> Before expanding on the issue of learning process and structure, I want to touch on one other aspect of the Study Group that seems at odds with a PDE criterion for legitimate professional education program:

12. Only time on-task may be counted as a continuing professional education learning experience for hours applicable toward 180 hours. The following activities may not be counted as time on task . . . . Time allocated for social activities, refreshment breaks, luncheons, receptions, dinners, etc. (PDE, 2000. p. 6)

While I understand the PDE’s desire to preclude granting credit for “the three martini lunch,” the dichotomization of “time-on-task” and “social activities” speaks to an impoverished concept of “learning environment.” By environment, I do not mean the location of a program, the room arrangement, or amenities like refreshments. Rather, I am referring to a nurturing ambiance that allows for intellectual vulnerability.

### ***Ambiance of the Study Group***

As one post-dissertation member of our Group often jokes, “I keep coming for the food.” The Study Group meets from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. Because we meet over the dinner hour and members are often coming directly from work, we bring food to share as we talk. As the number of Group members has increased, so has the amount of food. In fact, at one point, so much food was

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<sup>9</sup> I also think it is regrettable that an educational regulatory agency would establish criteria that privilege an extremely narrow conception of curriculum and force those who would be creative to argue for the legitimacy of their position.

left at the end of the evening, we initiated an alternating schedule--the "A's" would bring food to one meeting; the "B's" to the next. Interestingly, more often than not, people ignore this system, and bring food to every meeting. I have come to believe the act of sharing food is symbolic of the Group's commitment to nurturing each other. This nurturing quality creates an ambiance for discursive, deliberative learning.

Learning as discursive deliberation is highly relational. In other words, the possibility of learning is engendered through the willingness of individuals to enter into conversations that push them to "the edges of their knowledge." Often in social, academic and professional discussions, we are called upon to share what we already know. This, in itself, can be somewhat scary--suppose what I know isn't correct, isn't good enough, isn't valued? Learning through involvement in discursive deliberation typically focuses on the nebulous conceptual space between what one thinks one knows and a next conceptual step that is unknown. This is risky business. It requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to show one's ignorance, to expose one's fear of inadequacy. This does not mean we sit around wallowing in our anxiety. Nor do we sit around as one person put it, "Holding hands and singing Amazing Grace."

There is, however, a lot of feeling associated with the intellectual struggle to work with ideas that I do not fully understand and to engage in conceptual tasks that exceed my current capability to assimilate and use information. For example, I enjoy writing and, to a great extent, my curriculum consulting work requires me to write technical documents. So when I entered into the dissertation process, I thought of myself as a competent writer. However, once I had amassed a tremendous amount of literature and interview data, I had no idea what to do with all of it. I had trouble knowing what to write and when I did get something on paper, it sounded horribly banal. This went on for several months until I was convinced that I was neither as smart as I had thought, nor as skilled a writer. In the still, dark hours of the night, I would cry in frustration and despair--what had ever made me think I could do a dissertation? It is possible to lose oneself in the depths of such a struggle that tests the limits of one's abilities. Being part of the Study Group gave me a place to share my anxiety and then to assimilate new ideas and new perspectives with which to work. The Group did not provide answers to my learning, but it sustained me through the process.

This type of learning, that fully engages one's mind and spirit, does not occur in the company of strangers. A sense of trust in a community of learners is crucial. For me, this trust has evolved as we engage in conversations over meals as much as conversations that are part of our official "meeting agenda." There is an ebb and flow to the exchange of ideas and feelings. One minute we are deep into conversation about existentialism or narrative pedagogy; the next we are laughing at someone's witty (and often sharply insightful) remark. All of our time together is "time-on-task," even though to an outsider, we may seem to be socializing. Asking about new developments in each other's personal lives as well as about progress on professional endeavors weaves into the fabric of our learning community a sense of caring that allows us to risk thinking aloud in the presence of others--even if that thinking is muddled, off-the-mark, or embryonic. This brings me back to the point of discursive deliberation and issues of structure and process.

### **Structure and Process**

A colleague who is supremely skillful at facilitating learning groups, once remarked, "If the process and structure are right, trust will follow." This "formula" has stayed with me over the years and has helped me to understand another aspect of what makes the study group work for me. The process we engage in is one of "discursive deliberation." The structure that supports this process is non-hierarchical. The authenticity of group members engenders trust.

At first glance, "discursive deliberation" may seem merely like a pretentious way of saying "thoughtful discussion." For me, however, the term connotes a commitment to intellectual engagement and generativity that is not necessarily present in more casual forms of conversation. "Deliberation" is not so much something I do, but more a frame of mind or posture I assume toward learning. Elsewhere (Piantanida & Garman, 1999), Noreen and I have described this deliberative mode of learning in relation to dissertation research as:

. . . continual cycles that require the learning to *question, listen, think, and act*. In framing productive questions, one is actively seeking information or commentary about his or her preconceived ideas. In a deliberative mode, listening requires one to set aside judgmental filters in order to hear more deeply what is being presented. Thoughtful reasoning helps the learner sort out the significant from the trivial. Most important, however, is the action—what one does with the information presented. Action here implies a way of thinking in order to advance the inquiry. This may mean further conceptualization, consideration of new ideas, and revision of current thinking. In the deliberative mode, ideas are treated as momentary conclusions that are always subject to revision and extension. To act, then, is to revise, to produce a next draft of one's thinking and writing. (p. 227)

As this description implies, deliberation does not occur in isolation. Rather, it occurs through discursive exchanges with others. The quality of my thinking is advanced by the quality of responses I receive from others and through the quality of responses I am

challenged to give to others. The intellectual intensity and vitality of these exchanges are made possible, I am convinced, by the non-hierarchical structure of the Study Group.

Although Noreen is a university professor, initiator of the Study Group, and an extremely important resource to the Group's deliberations, it is not HER group. She is not "in charge" of it. While she plays a facilitative role, she is not a designated LEADER in terms of having responsibility for planning and conducting our meetings.<sup>10</sup> She brings to the group--as we all do--a body of expertise, a way of seeing the world, a set of values about educational practice, a style of grappling with ideas, and a desire to learn. She is as engaged in learning as the rest of us. She values our ideas and insights as much as we value hers and each other's. We are, in short, a deliberative and discursive community where learning evolves as ideas are continually expressed, critiqued, and reformulated. It is the authenticity of group members that makes these exchanges so generative for me.

By authenticity, I mean, a way of being in the world that is imbued with integrity—a capacity and commitment to being honest with one's self and others. In the Group, I don't worry about hidden agendas, mixed messages, game playing, self-promotion, one-ups-manship, and other types of power plays. I trust that group members say what they mean and mean what they say—always with a sense of caring, compassion and respect. I don't mean to paint us as paragons of virtue. Certainly we have our foibles and make mistakes. But it is our willingness to work things out that allows me to trust and, in turn, to risk the vulnerability associated with discursive deliberation. To trust in the authenticity of others is tremendously liberating, allowing me to give to and get from the Group in highly generative ways.

### **What I Am Able to Give and Get**

What I have gained in the Study Group is an intellectual home. It is a place where I am at liberty to engage in conceptual exchanges without fear of boring others or of being ridiculed. I have the freedom to exercise my intellect—to flex it, to push it, to stretch it in ways I never imagined I could. This has given me a sense of self-confidence and self-worth that I had never experienced while growing up. I also experience a sense of profound humility that such incredibly intelligent and capable women welcome me into their company and affirm who I am and what I am able to offer. I feel this is a place I can give the best I am capable of giving, and receive in return the warm regard of others. This has allowed me to generate intellectual products—proposals, conference presentations, workshops, manuscripts for journal articles, one published book and several books in various stages of completion--that I could not have pre-planned in relation to a specific need or "clear, concise, written content- and skill-based competencies (PDE, 2000, p. 5). This milieu of intellectual freedom and challenge is

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<sup>10</sup> Rather than relying on a formally designated leader in a hierarchically privileged position, each member of the group functions as a "leaderly participant." By this, I mean that all of us care about the well-being of the group and raise issues of structure and process that might concern us. In addition, members bring to the group highly honed group participation skills including: a willingness to listen without interrupting others; owning one's statements by speaking in the first person rather than attributing ideas to some anonymous "them" or "you"; monitoring the amount of "air time" one is taking so that everyone who needs time on the agenda has it; avoiding side conversations. When group members have such skills, facilitating discussions is virtually effortless, because no one person is burdened with responsibility for "making things happen."

what makes the Study Group work for me and why I am eternally grateful that I received an invitation that I couldn't refuse.

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## Inviting Learning A Think Piece

Noreen B. Garman, Ph.D.

Since I became an educator, I've thought a lot about what it means to be involved in someone else's learning. The older I get, the more mysterious becomes this idea of teaching and learning. There doesn't seem to be a close connection between the two efforts in the traditional classroom. It's true, researchers have spent a good deal of energy focused on teaching techniques for "best practices" that might bring about planned learning---yet I know in my heart that I can't guarantee that students will learn what I mandate.

Early in my career I bought into the common folklore of education. If students could pass the test, that meant they had learned what I wanted. Grades were a good motivator when students were reluctant learners. The language of pedagogy was shaped to name those techniques that "work" and thus legitimize the existing folklore about power struggles between teachers and students.

Reluctantly I began to realize that the *will to learn* is at the heart of a person's coming to know something. *Will* is the control the mind has over its own actions, the power of choosing one's own actions and the act of asserting one's choice. As teachers we have no control over someone else's will. All we can hope for is *willingness*---the consent of the student to join us in a common learning space and faith that something worthwhile will happen as the events unfold. (Curriculum is, after all, the normative and contrived articulation of what we hope goes on in that space.)

When I think of myself in a contrived learning space, it can be daunting, indeed. When I have been responsible, as a teacher, for initiating learning spaces, I know how heavy the burden is to nurture the willingness to learn...and most of all, my own willingness to learn. Learning space is the psychic, as well as the literal, time/place where my students and I can bring our will to learn and our willingness to engage with each other's ideas. The concepts of will and willingness to learn create a major dilemma for educators as we face the demands of formal school structures. It's no wonder that we continue to perpetuate the folklore which makes the power struggles in education legitimate

It is this philosophic dilemma which drew me to the idea of the study group as a non-formal learning space. A study group structure need not carry with it the trappings of typical academic mandates and sanctions. A study group can provide its members with the freedom to test the will to learn. For some it can be, as Willis (1998) describes an adult learning experience, "a utopian space being built...where positive future oriented utopian possibilities can take shape in people's imagination." For others, the study group can be a confining and stifling place where one's intellect is too much challenged and diminished. In reality, study group members often report that they experience both sensations.

Peter Willis' notion of "utopian space" may seem a bit exaggerated, yet there is an insular sense to study group time and space. The day to day life of its members are set aside as participants enter a dialogic world of ideas and inspiration, as well as a mix of all kinds of inter-personal exchanges: invitations, appraisals, rejections, challenges and even family-style fighting centered on learning.

The study group phenomenon can also be thought of as an opening out, closing in experience of self and ideas being discovered and opened out to group members; a closing in (and closing out of the teacher) when members push back and pursue their own agendas.

In 1980 I surely wasn't aware of the nuances of study group dynamics when I initiated a dissertation study group with my advisees in the Department of Curriculum and Supervision. I was working individually with doctoral students on their dissertation research, and it was clear that a number of them were searching, hoping to find new inquiry methods. Moreover, doing a dissertation is a lonely process. I found myself spending a great deal of time individually with each student, struggling to imagine new approaches to her work. So I decided to invite seven of them to become a study group. We met every two to three weeks around my dining room table. Each had a unique agenda, yet there were enough common concerns for us to read and discuss relevant literature and to struggle collectively with thorny issues.

I must admit that my invitation then was primarily out of selfish motives. I needed to become a member of a learning group and relinquish my teacher-as-expert role. I didn't have the expertise regarding new research methods. I invited intelligent, strong-willed women who were genuine skeptics and who had made high academic reputations in the Department. (At that time all of my advisees at the dissertation stage were women.) It became an invitation/orientation-to-learning experience; a listening, attention-pursuing phenomenon. My role was as the convener of the group and the challenge was, in Willis' language,

...leaving openings for learning to emerge, being alert to pick and celebrate...cooking a feast of possibilities. It is like standing back and allowing the learning energy of the group to build up and flood; and participants learning by being involved in an intense and buoyant and open way; as a kind of non-teaching; of becoming silent and allowing the tasks to speak for themselves, like working to become invisible; to let the required learning tasks emerge from the experience rather than from the teacher. (p.244.)

This "working to become invisible" was a real challenge for me. Knowing Peter Willis as a good friend and colleague, I don't think he meant that we, as adult educators, can really become invisible in a study group. (Peter, himself, poses a striking and intellectually seductive figure.) It was the conscious working at it---the becoming silent when I wanted to move in right away and give the insightful ideas that had come as a result of the deliberations. I was continually struck by the wisdom of the group members who offered similar, and often better, ideas than

mine. Still the lived experiences presented an interactive tension between myself and the other learners, and among them also. In part, I think it was the unpredictable nature of learning groups. I felt a heavy responsibility to help maintain the health and productivity and to try to ward off oppressive aspects of the group. It was a continual struggle to know how to be a responsible participant.

Within eight years each member of the study group wrote a meritorious dissertation that added to a body of literature which remains today as an example of rigorous and creative research.

Study groups, as academic experiences, tend to have limited lives. Participants come together, engage in the intense deliberations, and, as members complete their work, the group dissolves. In the case of our dissertation study group, an interesting thing happened! The Study Group continued, with new members accepting invitations while others leaving after graduation. Three generations have contributed to the ongoing tradition of The Group. (See Maria Piantanida's Think Piece, "An Invitation I Couldn't Refuse... What Makes a Study Group Work for Me" in this publication for further discussion of the three generations)

During the third generation Study Group, Maria Piantanida (who was a doctoral student in the original group) returned to the table. (The "table" had become the psychic and symbolic reference for deliberation.) Over the years Maria and I had continued a collaborative relationship through informal discussions and writing. In her Think Piece, she refers to me as her mentor. Interesting how some mentor/mentee relationships evolve. Somewhere, in our ongoing deliberations, Maria became my mentor. Her passionate search for new insights continually challenged me. Even during our most didactic exchanges there was never a sense of certitude, but rather a feeling of temporary certainty that gave life to important ideas. Fortunately for the study group Maria brought her scholarly proclivities to the table. She provided, in many ways, a special mentor-like relationship to the novice researchers and writers. Through her own intellectual searching she was able to call forth strength and dormant potentiality in others. She reminded us that we all had the license to challenge and comfort. Her special role came from her inner experience of having met and completed a particular learning challenge on one hand, and on the other, she engendered a strong feeling of oneness with other learners who were yet to be there. She represented the person who had made it---and allowed others to see that they, too, could do it. They were able to say, "It must be possible." She brought the sense of being "one" and "the other" at the same time. I describe Maria's role here, not to give admiring testimony to her, but rather to suggest that each member, like Maria, has a special role and competence to bring to the table. There's not enough room here to present their contributions. I hope that their Think Pieces will give a sense of their invaluable and unique roles.

Perhaps it was Maria's presence, however, that resulted in having one of my fondest wishes for The Group come true. At times I had hoped that, as members finished their dissertations, some would remain at the table and continue to contribute to

discussions from their experience, write and thereby provide another dimension to the life of The Group. At present nine members have finished their doctorates and continue their membership by contributing to the deliberations and writing. Their scholarship has added to the growing literature of creative qualitative dissertations and has become the centerpiece for the book, *The Qualitative Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty*. (Piantanida and Garman, 1999)

At present the sixteen member group is known as the Dissertation/Writing Group. We meet every two to three weeks and individual members bring their writing (often beginning with a Think Piece) to the table for critique. Authors usually send their work electronically before the meeting. We also share literature... journal articles and papers that capture an idea or issue significant to the collective deliberations. Over the past ten years these deliberations have become increasingly sophisticated and intellectually challenging, primarily because members had long ago gotten beyond the need for "saving face" and politeness (Goffman, 1967). Study group members engage with a commitment to "honesty," transcending the tendency to give lip service to each other's ideas. There is a deeply authentic nature about the interactions that visitors notice when they join the discussions. There is a collective spirit of generative wisdom.

When I think about what it means to invite people into a study group space, I have come to know that the potential for learning is boundless. Yet I worry that it's too easy to romanticize that potential, to extol the virtues of people working together toward common goals with a sense of "vision." Harmony is not necessarily a common characteristic of productive groups. In the Dissertation/Writing Group, as in all study groups, each member brings her own goals, as well as a group sensitivity. In our study group the agenda is intended for members to contribute to each others' work. This engenders a dynamic tension that challenges the harmony. A major factor, however, is that individuals in the group remain interesting enough to one another that they offer stimulation and provocation. Part of the dynamic tension is generated by each individual's own fascinating inner world. Members find themselves learning from each other in very different ways.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that a person faces as part of our study group is related to my earlier comments directed toward the will to learn and the willingness to enter a common learning space. When people come to the table, they begin to realize that it takes a kind of *surrender* of one's individual will to the demands of the deliberative process. Willing surrender is a very complicated process. (It brings a high level of risk that bears more probing than I can provide here.) As a member puts forward her ideas, she is taking a stance that invites a counter stance. That invitation runs the risk of undermining one's intellectual (and perhaps ideological) identity. Discursive knowing happens as one is willing to recognize the significance within the counter stance and consider potential revisions of one's ideas.

Thus discursive knowing happens when one is willing to surrender to the process of deliberation. It should be no surprise, then, that, at first, some study group members

have a great deal of trouble engaging in the deliberative process. They are willing to “enter the space” yet focus a lot of energy in keeping their identities in tact... in protecting themselves from the pain of surrender. These members often *acquiesce*... that is, they give the illusion of entering the deliberation by seeking approval of their work and by submitting to what they imagine is the norm of the group. Acquiescent members seem to perceive the study group as hierarchical and their view is either a source of compliance or complaint that may impede their thinking. As members struggle to move from acquiescing to the authority of the group, to surrendering to the deliberative process, their progress soars. It’s a tough struggle, yet as members see their writing take on a rich conceptual quality, it seems worth the effort

A few months ago our Dissertation/Writing Group accepted an invitation to become a “study group on study groups” ... to share our experiences and insights about what happens when educators are “invited to learn.” The Think Pieces in this document are the thoughtful and eloquent responses to that request. As we discussed the task, we raised several questions; among them, Can our study group provide any insights, even lessons, for professional development efforts in Pennsylvania? Does Pennsylvania’s Act 48 help or hinder this prospect? The Think Pieces have demonstrated that there may be common issues that individual members of a study group face.

Perhaps the most poignant question is - How is it that the Dissertation/Writing Group might provide insights, coming from members who chose to surrender to their academic dreams? How generalizable are these willing efforts... efforts for some members that have continued for ten years of membership? All of our members are practitioners who are dedicated to studying aspects of their practice. Half are public school educators. I am convinced that the study group provides an intellectual home... a space where members can give themselves over to the collective spirit that brings forth their wiser powers.

I know that there are teachers and administrators in our schools who are intellectually hungry for the kind of sustenance that a study group can provide, yearning to regenerate that collective spirit and then revitalize themselves from it as they work together. What a rich potential for our schools and our children.

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