

Searching for Professional Fulfillment:  
My Journey to Study Group  
A Think Piece  
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**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>1</sup>

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1. Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest Emily Dickinson’s Poems* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. 166.