

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.

REFERENCES

Garman, N. (1982). The clinical approach to supervision, in (ed.) T. Sergiovanni, *Supervision of Teaching*. 1982 ASCD Yearbook. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. NY: Anchor.

Noreen Garman is a professor of education in the Department of Administrative and Policy Studies and co-director of the Institute for International Studies in Education at the University of Pittsburgh. She teaches curriculum, instructional supervision, and qualitative/interpretive research. She has numerous publications in these fields of education. As a Fulbright senior scholar, she has organized and facilitated study groups in Australia, Bosnia and the Philippines.