

Inviting Learning A Think Piece

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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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