

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

References

Goodlad, J. I. (1984). A place called school: Prospects for the future. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Shubert, W. H. & Ayers, W. C. (Eds). (1992). Teacher lore: Learning from our own experience. New York: Longman Publishing Group.

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