

A THINK PIECE ON “THINK PIECES”

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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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