An Invitation I Couldn't Refuse--What Makes "The Study Group" Work for Me
A Think Piece
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Introduction

In 1980, I had finished all of the course work for my doctoral program, and the time had come to begin the dissertation. At this pivotal moment in my educational journey, my advisor and mentor, Dr. Noreen Garman, extended an invitation I couldn't refuse. Let me be clear. In no way was I forced to accept her invitation. Rather, the opportunity she offered was so exciting there was no way I would miss out on it.

On the face of it, her mildly worded invitation doesn't seem all that galvanizing. "Several of my advisees are ready to work on their dissertations," she said. "I'm thinking about forming a study group to look at alternatives to traditional quantitative research. Would you be interested in participating?" Sometimes, life-altering experiences begin with such unassuming invitations. Accepting the invitation is more an act of faith than a reasoned choice among strategies for accomplishing an objective. In the case of Noreen's invitation, I had faith that I would learn through my involvement with the newly forming group and that whatever I learned would be of value to me. I had faith in Noreen, in the other students who were to be part of the group, and in whatever process unfolded.

More than 20 years have passed since I joined "The Study Group." During that time, the Group has evolved through three generations, and I have been an active participant in the first and third.[1] In this think piece, I want to share a little of why I stay involved with the group and address the question, "What makes it work so well for me?" While there are many potential responses to that question, I want to touch on the following:

> o   the people;
> o   a focus on learning;
> o   the ambiance;
> o   the structure and the process; and
> o   what I am able to give and get.

In the process of reflecting on these aspects of my study group experience, I hope to raise issues that others might consider should they have occasion either to extend or receive "an invitation to study group."

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[1]The first generation Study Group began in 1980 and ended in 1988 when the last member completed her dissertation. The second generation began in 1990 with a new group of students and continued until 1994 or 1995 when most of these students completed their dissertations and moved on. The third generation began to emerge from the second group. Its beginning was marked not so much by the influx of new members as by a subtle shift in the quality of deliberation within the group.

The People

Without a doubt, I remain with the Study Group and find it productive because of the other women who participate in it. It feels a bit odd to talk about "them" as others who are apart from me. My over-riding sense of the Group is always a sense of "we"; not me and them. Yet, the women who constitute the Group do come as individuals, and each one is bright, funny, competent, and committed to her professional work. I always feel uplifted in their company. I always enjoy our conversations. I look forward to the time we spend together.

When I incorporate study groups into courses that I teach, at least one student will inevitably ask, "How important is it that the members of the group have similar interests?" Usually, they associate "similar interests" with circumstantial (and to me superficial) characteristics such as similar work role/title, similar work setting, enrollment in the same educational program, or shared interest in a topic area. The assumption seems to be that having such common interests is a pre-requisite for productive discussions; if others don't understand "where I'm coming from," how can they give me useful feedback; if we're talking about topics tangential to my areas of expertise, what can I offer; if we're focused on someone else's work, won't I be bored? This is a rather impoverished way of thinking about what a study group represents.

From the outset of the Study Group, the diversity represented by group members has enriched our deliberations. Currently, the group includes two high school teachers, three elementary school teachers, six higher education faculty/administrators, two consultants, a public school administrator, and two full-time doctoral students. Our areas of study include English literature and composition, art education, public health, evaluation, international education, adult education, curriculum, and social foundations of education. The focus of our dissertation inquiries range from creative dramatics in elementary school to genetic counseling; from educational inclusion to placement caregiving of patients institutionalized because of Alzheimer's Disease. The research methods we are studying include narrative, visually arts-based, heuristic, grounded theory, case study, secondary analysis, personal essay, literary criticism, and spiritual inquiry.

What is it about this diversity that works for me? First, I can learn vicariously about ideas, bodies of literature, and writers who are not directly related to my areas of study. This keeps me from developing an overly narrow focus in my thinking; it challenges me to re-examine my assumptions; it gives me fresh outlooks on the world around me. Second, whenever I need to find resources for a particular project, I can turn to the group for recommendations. It is uncanny how often they can point me to just the right source of help when I need it. Third, and most important, I have been challenged and stretched in the ways I make sense of the world. In my more callow youth, I assumed that everyone thought in the same way I did. When I discovered that this wasn't so, I harbored the rather ego-centric view that my way of thinking was superior. What I've learned from the women in the study group is the power of thinking in the form of fictive and non-fictive narratives, visual images, and spiritual meditations. In short, the diversity of the group represents a fertile context for my own learning, and this brings me to an aspect of the group that members do have in common--a passion for learning.

I use the term, "passion," to convey a sense of intellectual intensity, a fierce engagement with ideas, a zeal for expanding what one knows of oneself and the world. This passion is enacted through a process of discursive deliberation. I shall return to this point after addressing another aspect of the Study Group, its focus on learning.

A Focus on Learning

As a curriculum consultant, I spend a great deal of my professional life working with groups. In my earlier years as a manager of education in a hospital, I spent a great deal of time working in committees. In my even earlier years as a staff member of a health planning agency, I spent a great deal of time working with community groups. In each case, the purpose of such group work had been to accomplish a task--e.g., plan a curriculum, decide how to evaluate a medical training program, improve the quality of ambulance services. Accomplishing the task often entailed a great deal of learning, which I enjoyed. So I don't want to discount the value of learning associated with work-based, task-oriented study groups. I feel compelled to say, however, that such work-focused learning has a very different valence for me than the learning I do in the Study Group. Learning done in conjunction with my professional responsibilities is, in a sense, utilitarian. It serves a useful purpose and that purpose serves the needs and interests of an organization. Any personal satisfaction or benefit derived from the learning is likely to be tangential, and inconsequential, to the concerns of the organization.

In the Study Group, I engage in learning for my own sake. Occasionally , I may have a specific purpose--like learning what I needed to know in order to complete a dissertation. But most of the time, I have no such end in mind. My commitment is not to accomplishing a goal, but rather to be involved in a community of passionate learners. What I gain from that involvement is most often a surprise. The element of surprise, of serendipity, infuses the Study Group experience with a sense of energy, of generative possibility. I want to stay involved, because I want to see what will happen next. Often I am delighted when the conversation sparks an unexpected reconnection between information I acquired years ago and some matter under current consideration. Just as often, I am amazed when I enter into a whole new line of thinking because of a question raised by someone in the group or a discussion of a thorny dilemma. I am humbled and grateful when someone else's perspective pierces a bubble of certitude and helps me see how my thinking has been too limited or completely off-base.

Since the publication of Malcolm Knowle's book, *The Adult Learner, A Neglected Species*, it has become a cliche of professional development programs to begin by asking participants why they are attending the program and what they hope to get from it. Predicated on the assumption that adults know what they want and want to get that as efficiently as possible, this approach to professional development feels as utilitarian to me as learning in order to better serve the purposes of a work organization. Beyond that, it feels unbearably sterile--a vision of my educational needs grounded in the limitations of my current ignorance and satisfied by others through efficiently delivered "learning" packages.

My learning in the Study Group is predicated, not on a preconceived notion of what I want to

know, but rather on faith in the possibility of significant meanings emerging from my intellectual engagement with a deliberative community. I recognize that such faith may be a luxury. I am involved in the Study Group of my own volition. I am answerable to no one but the Group for my investment in it. I am accountable to no one but myself for what I gain from it. When I hear rhetoric linking study groups to professional development initiatives like Pennsylvania's current Act 48, I cannot help but wonder about the fragility of faith. Assuming an individual educator would have faith in such an organic approach to learning, would a school administrator have enough faith to approve his/her involvement, and would the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) have sufficient faith to see this as a legitimate mode of professional development? I fear not, when I read criteria like the following from the PDE (2000) guidelines for approving professional education programs:

1. Each learning experience is planned in response to an educational need identified by a target audience.

2. Each learning experience has clear, concise, written content- and skill-based competencies. (p. 5)

Such language is rooted in what Schon (1983, 1987) describes as a rational technical approach to education. It is grounded in what Garman (1989) calls a "closed curriculum structure." It privileges an instrumental view of learning that has been challenged by curriculum theorists (e.g., Applebee, 1996; Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Marshall, Sears & Schubert, 2000; Pinar, 1975; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). My colleague, Cindy, tells me that educators need not be limited by the functionalist wording of the criteria. It is possible, she assures me, to (re)interpret these criteria in a much broader way. Although I hope this is true, it is the mindset reflected in this language that troubles me. It is not a mindset that exudes a faith in the possibilities of learning through engagement in a process.[2] Before expanding on the issue of learning process and structure, I want to touch on one other aspect of the Study Group that seems at odds with a PDE criterion for legitimate professional education programs:

12. Only time on-task may be counted as a continuing professional education learning experience for hours applicable toward 180 hours. The following activities may not be counted as time on task . . . . Time allocated for social activities, refreshment breaks, luncheons, receptions, dinners, etc. (PDE, 2000. p. 6)

While I understand the PDE's desire to preclude granting credit for "the three martini lunch," the dichotomization of "time-on-task" and "social activities" speaks to an impoverished concept of "learning environment." By environment, I do not mean the location of a program, the room arrangement, or amenities like refreshments. Rather, I am referring to a nurturing ambiance that allows for intellectual vulnerability.

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2 I also think it is regrettable that an educational regulatory agency would establish criteria that privilege an extremely narrow conception of curriculum and force those who would be creative to argue for the legitimacy of their position.

Ambiance of the Study Group

As one post-dissertation member of our Group often jokes, "I keep coming for the food." The Study Group meets from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. Because we meet over the dinner hour and members are often coming directly from work, we bring food to share as we talk. As the number of Group members has increased, so has the amount of food. In fact, at one point, so much food was left at the end of the evening, we initiated an alternating schedule--the "A's" would bring food to one meeting; the "B's" to the next. Interestingly, more often than not, people ignore this system, and bring food to every meeting. I have come to believe the act of sharing food is symbolic of the Group's commitment to nurturing each other. This nurturing quality creates an ambiance for discursive, deliberative learning.

Learning as discursive deliberation is highly relational. In other words, the possibility of learning is engendered through the willingness of individuals to enter into conversations that push them to "the edges of their knowledge." Often in social, academic and professional discussions, we are called upon to share what we already know. This, in itself, can be somewhat scary--suppose what I know isn't correct, isn't good enough, isn't valued? Learning through involvement in discursive deliberation typically focuses on the nebulous conceptual space between what one thinks one knows and a next conceptual step that is unknown. This is risky business. It requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to show one's ignorance, to expose one's fear of inadequacy. This does not mean we sit around wallowing in our anxiety. Nor do we sit around as one person put it, "Holding hands and singing Amazing Grace."

There is, however, a lot of feeling associated with the intellectual struggle to work with ideas that I do not fully understand and to engage in conceptual tasks that exceed my current capability to assimilate and use information. For example, I enjoy writing and, to a great extent, my curriculum consulting work requires me to write technical documents. So when I entered into the dissertation process, I thought of myself as a competent writer. However, once I had amassed a tremendous amount of literature and interview data, I had no idea what to do with all of it. I had trouble knowing what to write and when I did get something on paper, it sounded horribly banal. This went on for several months until I was convinced that I was neither as smart as I had thought, nor as skilled a writer. In the still, dark hours of the night, I would cry in frustration and despair--what had ever made me think I could do a dissertation? It is possible to lose oneself in the depths of such a struggle that tests the limits of one's abilities. Being part of the Study Group gave me a place to share my anxiety and then to assimilate new ideas and new perspectives with which to work. The Group did not provide answers to my learning, but it sustained me through the process.

This type of learning, that fully engages one's mind and spirit, does not occur in the company of strangers. A sense of trust in a community of learners is crucial. For me, this trust has evolved as we engage in conversations over meals as much as conversations that are part of our official "meeting agenda." There is an ebb and flow to the exchange of ideas and feelings. One minute we are deep into conversation about existentialism or narrative pedagogy; the next we are laughing at someone's witty (and often sharply insightful) remark. All of our time together is

"time-on-task," even though to an outsider, we may seem to be socializing. Asking about new developments in each other's personal lives as well as about progress on professional endeavors weaves into the fabric of our learning community a sense of caring that allows us to risk thinking aloud in the presence of others--even if that thinking is muddled, off-the-mark, or embryonic. This brings me back to the point of discursive deliberation and issues of structure and process.

Structure and Process

A colleague who is supremely skillful at facilitating learning groups, once remarked, "If the process and structure are right, trust will follow." This "formula" has stayed with me over the years and has helped me to understand another aspect of what makes the study group work for me. The process we engage in is one of "discursive deliberation." The structure that supports this process is non-hierarchical. The authenticity of group members engenders trust.

At first glance, "discursive deliberation" may seem merely like a pretentious way of saying "thoughtful discussion." For me, however, the term connotes a commitment to intellectual engagement and generativity that is not necessarily present in more casual forms of conversation. "Deliberation" is not so much something I do, but more a frame of mind or posture I assume toward learning. Elsewhere (Piantanida & Garman, 1999),   Noreen and I have described this deliberative mode of learning in relation to dissertation research as:

> . . . continual cycles that require the learning to *question, listen, think, and act*. In framing productive questions, one is actively seeking information or commentary about his or her preconceived ideas. In a deliberative mode, listening requires one to set aside judgmental filters in order to hear more deeply what is being presented. Thoughtful reasoning helps the learner sort out the significant from the trivial. Most important, however, is the action—what one does with the information presented. Action here implies a way of thinking in order to advance the inquiry. This may mean further conceptualization, consideration of new ideas, and revision of current thinking. In the deliberative mode, ideas are treated as momentary conclusions that are always subject to revision and extension. To act, then, is to revise, to produce a next draft of one's thinking and writing. (p. 227)

As this description implies, deliberation does not occur in isolation. Rather, it occurs through discursive exchanges with others. The quality of my thinking is advanced by the quality of responses I receive from others and through the quality of responses I am challenged to give to others. The intellectual intensity and vitality of these exchanges are made possible, I am convinced, by the non-hierarchical structure of the Study Group.

Although Noreen is a university professor, initiator of the Study Group, and an extremely important resource to the Group's deliberations, it is not HER group. She is not "in charge" of it. While she plays a facilitative role, she is not a designated LEADER in terms of having responsibility for planning and conducting our meetings.[3] She brings to the group--as we all do--a

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3 Rather than relying on a formally designated leader in a hierarchically privileged position, each member of the group

body of expertise, a way of seeing the world, a set of values about educational practice, a style of grappling with ideas, and a desire to learn.   She is as engaged in learning as the rest of us. She values our ideas and insights as much as we value hers and each other's. We are, in short, a deliberative and discursive community where learning evolves as ideas are continually expressed, critiqued, and reformulated. It is the authenticity of group members that makes these exchanges so generative for me.

By authenticity, I mean, a way of being in the world that is imbued with integrity—a capacity and commitment to being honest with one's self and others. In the Group, I don't worry about hidden agendas, mixed messages, game playing, self-promotion, one-ups-manship, and other types of power plays. I trust that group members say what they mean and mean what they say—always with a sense of caring, compassion and respect. I don't mean to paint us as paragons of virtue. Certainly we have our foibles and make mistakes. But it is our willingness to work things out that allows me to trust and, in turn, to risk the vulnerability associated with discursive deliberation. To trust in the authenticity of others is tremendously liberating, allowing me to give to and get from the Group in highly generative ways.

What I Am Able to Give and Get

What I have gained in the Study Group is an intellectual home. It is a place where I am at liberty to engage in conceptual exchanges without fear of boring others or of being ridiculed. I have the freedom to exercise my intellect—to flex it, to push it, to stretch it in ways I never imagined I could. This has given me a sense of self- confidence and self-worth that I had never experienced while growing up. I also experience a sense of profound humility that such incredibly intelligent and capable women welcome me into their company and affirm who I am and what I am able to offer. I feel this is a place I can give the best I am capable of giving, and receive in return the warm regard of others. This has allowed me to generate intellectual products—proposals, conference presentations, workshops, manuscripts for journal articles, one published book and several books in various stages of completion--that I could not have pre-planned in relation to a specific need or "clear, concise, written content- and skill-based competencies (PDE, 2000, p. 5). This milieu of intellectual freedom and challenge is what makes the Study Group work for me and why I am eternally grateful that I received an invitation that I couldn't refuse.

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functions as a "leaderly participant."   By this, I mean that all of us care about the well-being of the group and raise issues of structure and process that might concern us. In addition, members bring to the group highly honed group participation skills including: a willingness to listen without interrupting others; owning one's statements by speaking in the first person rather than attributing ideas to some anonymous "them" or "you"; monitoring the amount of "air time" one is taking so that everyone who needs time on the agenda has it; avoiding side conversations.   When group members have such skills, facilitating discussions is virtually effortless, because no one person is burdened with responsibility for "making things happen."

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