

Preface

Why This Collection of “Think Pieces”?

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When the School Performance Network (SPN) began to explore the notion of using educator study groups as a strategy for collaborative professional development and brought up the idea in our conversations about evaluation efforts, I immediately thought of my colleagues and our work in a collaborative study group focused on writing. It seemed to me that our group might be perfectly situated to engage in thinking about study groups since it was a group that had been in successful, sustained existence for a long period of time, and was primarily a group of educators or people involved in education in some way. While the group’s composition had changed over the years, its focus (assisting in dissertation and post-dissertation writing) and processes (providing thoughtful critique and dialogue on education and research-related issues) remained notably consistent.

I had come to value my own participation in the study group, not just as a means to an end in writing the dissertation, but more as a learning space for me to question issues of my practice and thinking as an educator and educational evaluator. As a result of my own experience, I very much wanted to encourage the SPN as well as other school-related initiatives to struggle to overcome the barriers to establishing study groups so that the experience might be more widely available across the region. So too, I cautioned the SPN and others not to take too naïve a position, thinking that establishing and maintaining study groups an easy and uncomplicated task. Working collaboratively as adults was not something that seemed valued or supported within most educational organizations that I had experienced. It seemed that the SPN, and hopefully the region, might gain from a more in-depth study of the nature of study groups as a strategy and process to support professional development.

So too, I thought, perhaps our study group might benefit from the experience. Not only might it be an opportunity for us to sit back a bit from our individual work within the group to reflect more globally on what the experience might mean for us, but also it would provide an opportunity for us to share some of our experience with colleagues across southwestern Pennsylvania. Some of my colleagues decided to give it a try.

I had assumed that the comfort and well-used strategies of our study group would carry over, and that our work would progress smoothly, with little need to pay attention to forming a working culture that supported our work collectively and individually. I was wrong. This was not a “failure” of the study group but rather it was a naïve assumption on my part! We came to affirm in our individual writings (as evidenced in this compilation) just how important cultural aspects of the study group are, just how much attention to individual and collective needs is required to sustain active involvement in a study group, yet my naïveté had assumed we were somehow “beyond” those issues. Though we had come to be quite comfortable as a working study group as we considered

our writing, when a smaller group of us came together as a “study group on study groups” we came to form a “new” group that needed to face the challenges of a “new” group, at least in part. I came to see just how important they are for *all* groups, as we struggled as a “new” study group, to in fact, study ourselves.

As I look back on the process, I have come to see that in many ways, though we had been an established study group, the new focus for this work, in fact, brought with it many of the same stressors and concerns other study group may be faced with: What are our individual and collective roles? What is expected of us and by whom? How will we determine our accountability? How will we juggle external and internal needs? How will we surface and resolve concerns, struggles, suspicions, doubts? How will we engage in a meaningful learning environment that supports our needs and also responds to an external agenda as well (whether by agreement with a group such as the SPN or through the regulations of Act 48¹ or some other external expectation)?

Graciously, my colleagues continued, committed to remain involved, even through the struggle. I am so glad we did. What we have produced is a collection of “think pieces” in various stages of development, with various focal points and a diversity of the “selves” that come together to form this study group --- that speaks to the struggles, the processes, the issues and the promises of engagement in collaborative learning with colleagues. The personal narratives offered here help to explicate the issues and concerns, challenges and opportunities of collegial study as educators. We begin with a piece written by Dr. Maria Piantanida that explores the writing genre of a “think piece” to help the reader understand why we have chosen this form of expression . Each of the subsequent pieces offers the author’s personal experiences as an invitation to the reader to more fully explore issues related to study groups.²

As in many learning situations, those that teach also learn. The engaged seasoned “experts” in a study group to produce some documentation that might help guide next steps for the region. In retrospect, the “experts” gained as much from the experience of studying together as the region might from our work --- a fitting statement about the deep benefit of collaborative study. When the commitment to learn and engage is real, the benefits far outweigh the challenges, the experience greatly worth the struggle.

¹ Act 48 is the Pennsylvania Department of Education regulation related to the conduct and expectations of professional development for educators, enacted in 2000.

² Using narratives of personal experiences as one way to explore a concept or area of interest is consistent with a more “interpretive” way of knowing or research that is recognized as particularly helpful in educational research, especially in practice-based research.