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ABSTRACT

Study groups are both a complement and an alternative to traditional staff development. Becoming a community of adult learners is a complex process involving a number of ingredients: purpose, logistics, resources, transfer of learning, electronic networking, sustenance, and assessment. These ingredients are not meant to take the place of traditional staff development, nor are they intended as linear progression to be followed prescriptively. They simply represent suggestions to be considered by teachers and administrators when forming study groups. Local needs determine the who, what, where, when, why, and how of professional groups--examples of several study groups from around the United States illustrate how different their purposes can be. The perspective to maintain, however, is that study groups are important, they stimulate individual and collective growth, and they support school improvement. Unless this complement to staff development is considered seriously, language arts educators may never achieve their full potential as professionals. (RS)

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Continuing to Grow as Language Arts Educators:  
Focusing on the Importance of Study Groups

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Growing and developing professionally are important aspects of a career. Traditionally, we have kept abreast of current trends by attending conferences, workshops, and graduate courses. Although these approaches have merit, they tend to lack intimacy and to focus on general issues instead of our specific concerns. As important, they do not help us to become a community of adult learners who cooperatively explore pertinent ideas and apply them to our classroom activities.

Study groups are both a complement and an alternative to traditional staff development. The essence of a study group is that it is intrinsically designed in a grass-roots level way to promote the type of exploration that is specifically important to the group members. For example, the whole language movement has motivated us as teachers and administrators to change our perspectives about children and how they become independent readers and writers. To better understand the whole language philosophy and its impact on the classroom, we not only have attended conventional inservice sessions but also have developed cooperative study groups. These groups are formed by us because we recognize the need to grow within a supportive context.

Regardless of our position as a teacher or a principal, in study groups we are equitable members who highlight topics that are important to us and who share insights about the topics. Not surprisingly, this sharing entices us to explore pertinent books, monographs, and articles. Thus, we are more likely to grow as

independent professionals and simultaneously to become a community of adult learners who enjoy discussing and applying worthwhile ideas.

### Important Ingredients

Effective study groups focus on the local school context, and their success is increased when a number of ingredients are evident. What follows is a discussion of suggested ingredients and examples of how they can be applied to study groups.

- Purpose. Study groups are more concerned with specific activities than with general issues, and those who join have common interests and goals related to the work environment. This commonality brings us together for the purpose of sharing important concerns that affect us and our students. Through informal discussions during lunch, in the principal's office, or elsewhere, a need emerges for coming together as a group to further discuss and resolve specific concerns.

For example, a study group at a Long Island (New York) school district was formed two years ago for the purpose of encouraging writing across the curriculum. The teachers and principal were satisfied with the students' writing process in English but were dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of writing in the other content areas. Cooperatively, volunteers began a study group to explore strategies for guiding students' writing beyond the English classroom. First, the volunteers agreed that a problem existed, and they talked about solutions to the problem. They also suggested that everyone search for articles and books that concern

writing across the curriculum. Subsequent meetings led to substantive and practical sharing in that the study group become increasingly aware of the importance of promoting content area writing not only as a basic communication skill but also as a profound thinking strategy; the group also discussed feasible ways of supporting students' writing in the subject areas, and these included focused free writing in journals and summary writing for small group discussions. Although the teachers and principal met initially with a clear purpose, they continue to get together regularly to share additional concerns.

● Logistics. After establishing a purpose, volunteers are usually concerned about the logistics of when meetings should occur, where they should be held, and how often they should take place. Agreement on these matters is based on the needs and constraints of the volunteers. If the study group maintains high morale, however, logistical concerns are cooperatively resolved.

Recently, an Indiana-based program called Teachers Under Cover (TUC) was described by Aldo Cardarelli in the May 1992 issue of The Reading Teacher. This program was designed to increase teachers' personal reading of contemporary, best selling books and to provide colleagues with opportunities to discuss the books. In TUC, educators come together to discover, share, and appreciate adult books and literature, and this process inspires them to be better reading role models for their students. Although this program supports personal reading habits, its rationale and logistics have equal merit for the type of professional reading habits that are

encouraged in study groups. Members of TUC decide cooperatively about the time and locations for meetings. Occasionally, meetings, occur in the school library or teachers' lounge, but they usually take place in a teacher's home or a restaurant. "These nonschool environments enable team members to relax, get to know one another, and enjoy the conversation of adults. Meetings occur once or twice a month; meetings usually last from one to two hours." (p.665) In adapting these logistical concerns to study groups, the important point to consider is that the volunteers themselves must have the freedom to decide on the times and locations of the meetings.

● Resources. As the study group meets at a comfortable time and place, individuals will probably discuss a variety of important concerns. If whole language is a philosophy, how do we carry out this belief system across the curriculum? What feasible strategies can we use for linking the reading/writing processes? As we reduce ability grouping and tracking, how can we effectively organize classroom instruction? These are only a few of the many concerns teachers and administrators broach in study groups. Over time, the participants develop trust in one another which generally leads to a relaxed, supportive climate. This atmosphere motivates individuals to pursue more substantive responses to the issues raised, and such responses require not only the wisdom of practical experience but also the support of the professional literature.

This knowledge-driven approach was highlighted by a study group in rural Massachusetts. Initially, discussions revealed discontentment with standardized testing, and the group attempted

to resolve this issue by suggesting alternatives that were both general and ambiguous. During subsequent meetings, however, participants began to focus on informal assessment as they read related journal articles, monographs, and books. Eventually, the group highlighted Yetta Goodman's work on kidwatching which appears in The Whole Language Evaluation Book (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1989). Kidwatching was considered effective because it provides opportunities for observing, interacting with, and analyzing students' behavior during writing, reading, listening, talking, art, drama, and other language-oriented activities. The study group held two-hour meetings after school on a semimonthly basis to discuss and support experimentation with kidwatching. These meetings gave teachers the impetus to (1) observe learners' performance from a distance while focusing on a student working individually, a student working in a group, the whole group working together, or the entire class; (2) interact with learners through conferencing, participating in small-group and whole-class discussions, posing pertinent questions, and reacting to students' journal entries; and (3) analyze learners' responses with in-depth approaches, such as miscue analysis. These kidwatching experiences accompanied by professional literature and study group discussions helped the participants to realize that the three types of assessment are usually overlapping and integrated. This realization supports Yetta Goodman's perspective that observing, interacting with, and analyzing students' behavior are powerful assessment "tools, especially when they are used in concert. Each

can help confirm the information gained from the use of the others." (p.8)

As the Massachusetts study group became empowered with kidwatching strategies, the members continued reading about and discussing informal assessment. They soon gained insights concerning portfolio assessment as a complement to kidwatching. After exploring a variety of resources, they focused on Sheila Valencia's four guiding principles that support the portfolio approach (The Reading Teacher, January 1990). These principles are (1) sound assessment is grounded in authenticity; (2) assessment must be a continuous process that records students' ongoing development; (3) valid assessment is a multidimensional process that samples a wide range of activities, responses, and processes; and (4) assessment must provide for collaborative reflection that helps to determine the extent of learning. Sheila Valencia's work also helped the participants to become aware of the pertinent items that should be placed in a portfolio, such as samples of students' writing, teachers' anecdotes of children's reading habits, classroom tests, checklists, students' self-evaluations, and other indicators of learning that represent the goals of instruction as well as a global picture of development. With experience, the participants realized that although the contents of a portfolio are important, its real value is the growth it represents in both students and teachers. To learn more about portfolio assessment, including its use in supporting students' self-assessment, the study group read and shared Robert Tierney, Mark Carter and Laura



Desai's Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom (Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 1991).

These and other resources were funded by the teachers' and administrators' associations, a local community group, and the school district's budget. The building administrator, who continues to be an active member of the study group, was instrumental in securing parental support and district funding for the professional resources.

- Transfer of Learning. Reading and sharing the professional literature provide us with a knowledgeable foundation for creating meaningful change in the classroom. Although knowledge by itself does not guarantee better teaching, it does increase our potential for more informed decision-making. Thus, study group agendas should emphasize not only pertinent concerns of the members but also feasible application of these concerns to the classroom setting. Such an approach considers the importance of both student outcomes as well as learning environments that support these outcomes.

For example, if creating the lifetime reading habit is one of our agreed upon outcomes for students, the study group works diligently to modify the classroom context to assure success with this outcome. Interestingly, in a paper presented at the National Reading Conference (St. Petersburg, FL, 1984), Leslie Morrow and Carol Weinstein reported that voluntary or independent reading programs that focus on literature-based approaches and classroom library corners are successful in increasing students' reading and

in changing teachers' attitudes. The active participation among colleagues appeared to be an important factor that influenced their improved attitude toward independent reading.

The important point to be made here is that sharing valuable information can lead to substantive support for classroom change which, in turn, can positively affect student outcomes. This perspective should be the focus of study groups because it reminds us that our growth as a community of adult learners can have a major impact on our students.

- Electronic Networking. At times, the study group may not be able to satisfactorily resolve an issue. Research concerning the issue may be limited, or we may not have the time or skill to synthesize research findings concerning a local problem. In such cases, electronic networking can provide an excellent source of support. Through this approach, teachers, administrators, and researchers are able to communicate with facility about a wide variety of issues. Writing in the May 1992 issue of Phi Delta Kappan, Gary Watts and Shari Castle believe that this type of communication can have a major influence on educators as well as the overall school, since it fosters "individual affirmation, a sense of faculty-ness, and informed decision-making." (p. 686)

One example of successful networking is the NEA School Renewal Network. It is designed dialogically in that it permits users to discuss or participate in a conference of individual topics. Its main purpose is to provide interaction between practitioners and researchers so that their integration of ideas results in school

renewal. Currently, ten prominent researchers have joined the School Renewal Network to support the dialogue for the conference structure which includes ten topics. These topics, which are considered crucial for school restructuring, include school/classroom organization, instructional strategies, positive school climate, curriculum, thinking, at-risk students, parent/community involvement, restructuring, networking/technology, and student assessment. Under each category are subtopics with hundreds of dialogue strands concerning ideas, problems, and issues. The use of appropriate software reduces phone costs and permits individuals to transmit with ease at any time during the day or night.

Although electronic networking, including the School Renewal Network, cannot meet all educational needs, it can help local study groups to solve a variety of problems. Variations of this innovation can also narrow the potential gap between practitioners and researchers as these two vital resources become dynamic partners.

- Sustenance. Any innovation, including study groups, is more likely to be sustained when teachers and administrators share responsibility in carrying out the innovation. Cooperation helps those of us who participate to grow with comradeship and with new ideas which, not surprisingly, support our developing sense of ownership. What then can we do to assure that the study group lasts? One of the most important factors is that we trust and respect one another as equals. Although each of us brings

something special to the group, no one should dictate or dominate agendas, goals, or outcomes.

With this foundation established, we are free to engage in a variety of activities, including discussing potential remedies for school problems, reading the related professional literature, contacting researchers via electronic networking, and applying newly gained insights to the problematic concerns. The study group, however, should not only focus on remedial or reactive situations since this perspective is too limiting. Thinking and acting proactively with a sense of mission are also vital to the school's future and the group's high morale.

Another approach to sustaining the study group is to prevent such potential crises as budget cuts. The district office staff is needed to provide financial support for subscribing to professional journals, duplicating pertinent materials, buying and renting staff development video tapes, and purchasing books, monographs, and other resources. A study group of ten members with an appetite for professional growth could easily require annual resources costing \$2,500. Thus, the participants need a consistently dependable budget which the district office staff and board of education can support through a guaranteed budget item that will not be cut in the future. In addition, the teacher and administrative associations and the local PTSA can provide some of the necessary funding for professional resources. If necessary, study groups may collect dues to lessen some of the expenses.

Establishing trust and respect for one another, engaging in

reactive and proactive activities, and preventing potential crises are only three approaches for sustaining the study group. These and other considerations are needed for maintaining the group's desire and enthusiasm to both grow professionally and carry out worthwhile ideas.

- Assessment. Among the main purposes of study groups is providing members with the opportunity to explore concerns that are important to them and giving them freedom to incorporate newly gained insights into the classroom. To determine the success of study groups, assessment should cover a number of areas. As members, were we treated equitably? Did we have sufficient opportunities to explore pertinent topics? Did our professional reading habits improve qualitatively and quantitatively? To what degree have we effectively applied new ideas to the classroom? Have we increased our knowledge of teaching and learning? Have our professional attitudes improved? Through group discussions, surveys, video tapes of classroom lessons, and informal peer observations in the classroom, we can reflect on our professional goals and the extent to which they are attained.

In a suburban Mississippi study group, the members meet on a weekly basis during the school year and use one meeting at the end of each ten-week progress period for assessment/reflection. At this time, the members retrospectively focus on what they have accomplished individually and collectively. They highlight key articles, monographs, and books they previously read and discussed, and they review their degree of success in applying worthwhile

ideas from the professional literature. For example, having read Judith Irwin and Mary Anne Doyle's Reading/Writing Connections: Learning from Research (IRA, 1992), the study group revealed varying levels of success in carrying out some of the ideas suggested by the chapter authors. Individuals who achieved much success with linking the reading/writing processes volunteered to informally observe colleagues who experienced less success. These volunteers also agreed to provide their colleagues with pertinent feedback for improvement. At subsequent study group meetings, members talked about their professional growth and also shared their students' outcomes related to the reading/writing processes. Specifically, one teacher showed examples of how her students successfully manipulated cohesive devices, a suggestion of Dixie Lee Spiegel in "Chapter 3." In addition to these worthwhile approaches, the Mississippi study group respects the members' confidentiality and therefore conducts surveys concerning their cooperative roles, professional reading habits, classroom application of innovative ideas, pedagogical knowledge, professional attitudes, and other areas. The focus of the surveys is to objectify the members' growth and development and to complement their informal discussions about assessment.

#### Benefits

These seven ingredients give positive support to study groups as they provide benefits for students, teachers, and administrators. Some of these benefits are worth mentioning.

1. Study groups focus on what we consider to be important.

This empowerment can help us grow within a supportive context while achieving personal satisfaction, resolving local professional concerns, and improving the learning environment.

2. Study groups emphasize cooperative sharing which usually stimulates us to read the professional literature, including monographs, books, and journals. This substantive approach can help us to make more informed decisions and also can inspire us to be better reading role models for our students.

3. Study groups with a membership of both teachers and administrators provide unique opportunities for realizing different perspectives, concerns, joys, and frustrations. This realization can lead us to a greater sensitivity of the needs of all members.

4. Study group outcomes usually are discussed at grade-level, department, and faculty meetings. The discussions not only provide a larger number of faculty with valuable, updated information but also encourage colleagues to form their own groups.

5. Study groups support positive public relations. Through presentations, newsletters, and other communication outlets, different "power" sources are made aware of the groups' productive activities. Thus, district office administrators, boards of education, and community members are likely to be delighted with dedicated study groups that meet regularly to improve the learning environment. Such delight can result in a variety of support, including the provision of additional funds for the study groups' resources, the passing of school budgets, and the approval of professional contracts.

### Cautions

To assure the success of study groups, certain cautions are necessary. A major concern is the role of administrative members who must neither project a political image of authority nor attempt to dictate the direction of the groups. Unless administrators are perceived as being equal to teachers, the groups will not fulfill their mission.

As important is the role of teachers, especially those who are representatives of teacher associations. If the representatives have a "union agenda," they are likely to stifle the professional growth of the study groups and to prevent the other members from becoming a genuine community of adult learners. As with administrative members, association representatives should function equitably with the other participants and should focus on educational matters.

Another caution is the role of funding. If the study groups are financially supported by the school budget, the PTSA, the administrative and teacher associations, the industrial community, or other sources, these support systems should not be permitted to control the groups' activities. Study groups must be allowed to maintain their freedom to explore important concerns, develop related agendas, and experiment with classroom application of worthwhile ideas. This context requires risk-taking with its resulting successes and failures. Without freedom to engage in such a context, study groups may typically represent bureaucratic, rhetorical, do-nothing committees.



### Summary

Becoming a community of adult learners is a complex process involving a number of ingredients. These ingredients are not meant to take the place of traditional staff development, nor are they intended as a linear progression to be followed prescriptively. They simply represent suggestions to be considered by teachers and administrators when forming study groups. Obviously, local needs determine the who, what, where, when, why, and how of professional groups. The perspective to maintain, however, is that study groups are important, they stimulate individual and collective growth, and they support school improvement. Unless this complement to staff development is considered seriously, we may never achieve our full potential as professionals.