

# Courage in the Academy: Sustaining the Heart of College and University Faculty

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*This article explores a significant element of faculty development that is often missing or given little attention. The author analyzes the results of a series of Courage Study Circles, which provided time and space for faculty members to reflect upon and revitalize their identity as teachers. The study draws on participant evaluations of yearly Study Circles and a survey of participants five years later. Responses indicate the effectiveness of these experiences, especially the opportunities for deep reflection and engagement in a safe community, in sustaining the professional practice of educators. Discussion includes specific implications for faculty development programs.*

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## Introduction

Support for faculty development within colleges and universities continues to grow, and has led to the establishment of numerous Centers for Teaching and Learning and Offices for Research. Increasing numbers of institutions provide funding for faculty to present at conferences and attend workshops on pedagogy, curriculum, and program development. The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education is a strong advocate for a professional approach to faculty teaching and learning.

Ouellett (2010) suggests that “faculty development” has evolved into an expansive term which encompasses three key areas of effort. The first, personal development, includes self-reflection, vitality, and growth. The second is instructional development, or course and student-based initiatives. He describes the third, organizational development, as program, departmental, and institution-wide efforts (p. 8). Current faculty development more often focus on the instructional and organizational areas rather than the personal. The need for sustaining the heart of teaching is seldom addressed or even recognized.

A key component of this personal development is a focus on who is teaching and the identity and integrity of the individual educator. According to Palmer (2010) educators often ask the “what” question about the subjects we teach and the “how” question about our methods and techniques. We may also ask “why” and explore the purposes and goals of teaching. He goes on to say

Seldom, if ever, do we ask the “who” question— who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my self-

hood form-or deform- the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes (p. 4)?

Many educational writers and leaders agree with Palmer. O’Reilly (2005) suggests fifty per cent of professional development should be about “analyzing and atomizing” while an equal amount of time and energy be devoted to developing “connection and wholeness.” She continues, “Retreat, replenishment, nurturance— how quickly we can lose track of the importance of these simple requirements of the stable soul” (p. 61). Intrator and Kunzman in “Starting With the Soul,” (2006), claim that the meaning and value elements of faculty support need to happen first, in order for other aspects to be effective. “Evoking the inner life of our teacher— that is, engaging teachers in activities that cultivate their capacity to teach with greater consciousness, self-awareness, and integrity— is a necessary condition for successful professional development” (p. 190). Their work aligns with O’Meara and Terosky’s (2010) research findings about commitment and professional growth: “...workers, including faculty, thrive when they take control of their own growth, work toward purpose-driven mastery and engage in positive professional relationships” (p. 48).

Several years ago, at a time in my teaching when I needed renewal and direction, I found Parker’s writing and the retreats based on his work. These writings explored the relationship of inner and outer life, the spiritual aspects of teaching, and the importance of identity and integrity in the teaching/learning process. Kessler (2000) and

Lantieri (2001) also wrote eloquently about the importance of nurturing the inner lives of both teachers and students and the ways to support connection and compassion in the school environment. Kabat-Zinn (1994) spoke of attending to each moment, slowing down and being mindful in a more holistic approach to life. In 2002, I completed facilitator preparation and began to facilitate *Courage to Teach* retreats. My experience led to a renewed sense of purpose for my teaching and enriched relationships with students and colleagues.

Eager to bring this practice and energy to others, I sent out an invitation to faculty at my university to come together and explore how *Courage* work might happen at our institution. Four colleagues were using *Courage to Teach* in their classes and fifteen faculty members responded to the invitation. They spoke of challenges in their current work life balance and their concerns for the teaching conditions in K-12 and college and university environments.

That beginning discussion led to a follow-up meeting where six people volunteered to act as a planning group and take the ideas that were surfacing and determine a series of next steps. The group decided to offer a year-long *Courage Study Circle* and over thirty-five faculty, one-third of the full-time faculty at the university, expressed interest. We submitted a proposal to the Provost, who supported the costs of books, lunch, and a facilitator stipend from her professional development budget. For each of the next four years, groups of between fifteen and twenty core faculty and two or three adjunct faculty participated in *Courage Study Circles*. Some faculty attended all four years, others for a single year or two.

The planning group built in a yearly evaluation process to better understand the value *Study Circle* participants found in their experiences and what, if any, changes in teaching practice resulted. More recently, the planners developed a survey to explore the longer-term effects of the *Study Circle* experience and determine the implications for future faculty development.

This article describes the structure of the *Courage Study Circles* and analyzes the reactions and comments of participants at the time of the *Circles* and through a survey sent to participants four to seven years after their experiences. The discussion includes recommendations for faculty professional development.

## Part One: *Courage Study Circles*

Each September faculty across the university received an invitation to participate in a full year *Courage Study Circle*. Participants met six times, each time for three hours for lunch and shared discussion and reflection. Each year they received a different book, which we read throughout the year (*The Courage to Teach, Stories from the*

*Courage to Teach, A Hidden Wholeness, and Teaching with Fire*). In the spring, the group held a one-day retreat at an off-campus site, which was also funded through the Provost's Office.

Palmer (2010) reminds us that we teach who we are and that the heart of teaching is the authentic connection we create between our students, our subjects, and ourselves. The *Courage Study Circles* followed a set of principles and practices that allowed time and a safe space to reflect on who we are, and what we bring of ourselves to our teaching and faculty responsibilities.

Ground rules, or *Touchstones*, gave people a different sense of the group right away, setting a frame for our time together. Some sounded familiar, and others offered a fresh and non-judgmental approach for individual and group exploration.

- Come to the work with all of the self.
- Presume welcome and extend welcome.
- Participation is an invitation, an opportunity, not a demand.
- No Fixing or giving advice.
- When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.
- Listen to the silence.
- Look to nature for insight and inspiration.
- Let our time together remain confidential within the group.
- Consider that it's possible to emerge from our time together refreshed.

Experiences included journaling, small and large group discussion, and creative activities based on poetry, music, or stories from various wisdom traditions. This process encouraged each person to do his or her own learning and growth in a safe, inviting space. Participants were not expected to leave the session with a new teaching technique, classroom practice, or disciplinary content. The goal was a renewed sense of ourselves as teachers who bring their integrated, whole selves to our students, subjects, and colleagues.

Several practices were especially important in the *Study Circles*. Increasing the silence between comments and building a discipline of listening in small and large group discussions encouraged deeper listening. Participants enhanced their listening by asking colleagues open, honest questions. These questions differ from those usually asked in classes or faculty meetings, which are often speeches or overt advice cloaked as questions. We do not know the answers to open, honest questions; rather they invite the speaker to look more fully at his or her situation. They allow us to explore issues more fully and listen to our own "inner teacher." Turning to wonder rather than rushing to judge others also keeps the *Circle* safe and reflective. If a participant becomes confused or

angered by another's comments, he or she is encouraged to wonder — about the speaker's experience, about his or her own response, and to listen even more carefully.

The Courage Study Circle design provided a holding space for participants to explore their life and teaching and to find their own value in the process. The Circles allowed for reflection, enriched exchanges with colleagues, and personal application.

## Part Two: Initial Participant Responses

"I learned so much about myself and learned that I am not alone in this quest to be a good teacher, community member, and citizen."

- Study Circle Participant

Each year fifteen to twenty faculty responded to the invitation to participate in a Courage Study Circle. They each wrote a brief statement as part of their registration which provides insight into their hopes for the experience. The responses fell into three categories: excitement about working with Palmer's books and ideas, the desire to be more reflective about their work, and the desire to be part of a learning community.

Some had read Palmer's books and found his work meaningful. As one faculty member said, "Parker Palmer's work focuses on the essence of our profession—we teach who we are. I want to continue to cultivate this view of the profession." Another talked about how the opportunity to immerse herself in the reflective discussions would build on her recent publications, which are "musings on his ideas and ---I could use the renewal." Many already appreciated the links with Courage and other educational efforts. One participant said, "I combine mindfulness and Courage to Teach principles in both my work as a therapist, as a teacher, supervisor and in the world at large."

Others wrote that reflecting on their work sounded inviting. "I need this opportunity to focus on what's really important in our work," one individual wrote. Another said he was "...eager to discover a process to help me use my energy, enthusiasm and optimism with my complicated students in a challenging world." One person recognized that reflection is necessary to deepen one's teaching experience: "Teaching and learning are activities that emanate from the interior and must therefore be continually examined in order to delve deeper." Another suggested, "I want to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be an authentic educator and mentor."

A few wrote about their desire to be part of a broader learning community. This interest appeared especially from those with one or two years of Study Circle experience, writing about why they wanted to come back for

another year. One faculty member wrote about the Circles as "... an opportunity to meet and participate with other faculty/academics from other parts of the institution in what I call a community learning environment." Another said she found the previous year "... very beneficial to my teaching and thinking about teaching...I like to continue that work and also enjoy the benefit of feeling energized around my practice and meeting/working with other faculty across campus."

Given these expectations and the kinds of support and interaction participants hoped for, what did they experience within the Study Circles, and to what degree were their expectations met? Each year participants filled out an evaluation that asked about the most meaningful aspects of the Study Circle, and any personal or professional changes that resulted. Responses about the most meaningful parts of the Study Circle fell into three categories: the structure of the sessions, the level of reflection possible during the Circles, and the community that the experiences created.

In terms of structure, some talked of the practice itself — small group discussion, experiences based on poetry, the silence, the space, the invitational nature of participation. Several people mentioned the full day retreat as especially valuable. Others appreciated the "Focused journal writing followed by small group sharing," and the "silence, the sharing, the conversation, the reading, the space." Another claimed she valued "The entire package. The monthly meetings followed by the day retreat seem to be a near perfect package."

Respondents highly valued the reflective component. As one person said, the most valuable was "The opportunity to create a space in my life to reflect, to focus, to think about myself as a teacher in a welcoming environment." Another wrote, "I have gained much from the quiet reflection and sharing opportunities during each session. I have truly felt 'refreshed' by sessions (I have never thought that possible.)"

Equally important was the strengthened community among participants. Comments indicated this in many ways. One person said, "...I believe Courage sessions build trust within the faculty community and begin to add depth to the community." Another claimed, "It was meaningful to work with other people at the University in a safe environment." Finally, one faculty member appreciated "Time to reflect. Time to share with others across the university....The conversations carry over to many aspects of my life."

Changes in personal or professional practice varied. A few brought Study Circle practices directly into their classroom. Faculty members wrote that they incorporated poetry, silence, and reflection into classes. One person said, "Use of poetry as part of discussion/reflection reminds me this could be done in any class or meeting."

Another wrote of applying the Touchstones to faculty work meetings. Another said she is “Trying to use silence more, exploring more how I do or do not develop connections with students/faculty.” Finally, one participant claimed, “I have brought in more reflective time into my classes as a result of the work. I feel more solidarity with my peers and this is across schools and divisions.”

Others found the effects more personal, focusing on their confidence or commitment to teaching. Responses included: “It has strengthened and fortified me as a teacher,” and “I have begun a serious phase of life reflection that was kicked off by the book and sessions...also I have come to know colleagues differently and love that.” Another felt “Stronger validation of my skills/talents as a teacher.”

One faculty member summarized the value of the Study Circle to him, in a statement that captures key elements of many participant responses:

I have found my involvement in Courage circles in past years invaluable in several ways: 1) it provides a wonderfully supportive structure to reflect upon my own teaching; 2) it supports considering the place of reflective education in the teaching/learning equation; 3) it makes room for “being” in the teaching/learning process; and 4) it provides me with a mechanism to develop as a faculty member within a community of colleagues.”

## Part 3: Survey Responses

“I have given myself more time to self reflect and journal, and to be more aware of my role as a listener both in the classroom and personally.”

- Study Circle Participant

The strong positive reactions expressed at the time of the Study Circles led the planning group to question what those responses and attitudes would be four or more years later. A total of 30 faculty members took part in the study circles. Twenty-six people, those who had participated in at least two sessions during any one year, received an on-line survey. Thirteen people (50%) returned the survey, and of those, 50% answered all the open-ended questions.

Participants were asked to describe experiences of the Study Circles they remembered as positive or challenging. They also described how they have applied Courage in their teaching or professional work and what aspects continue to be meaningful. The responses fell into similar categories as the earlier evaluations: Reflection, Community, Specific Practices, and Attitudes.

## Reflection

Respondents highlighted the value of time to reflect. As one faculty member said, “I remember appreciating the time to step back and reflect and share with other faculty.” Another agreed, saying, “The necessity and value to allow time for self-reflection regarding who we are in relation to our teaching.” Others mentioned particular activities or materials that led to reflection, including the readings and small group activities, and “Having the opportunity to reflect on paintings and poems.” One person was reminded of the “importance of reflection in teaching any population.”

## Community

The responses make clear that the community aspects of this experience remained memorable, enhancing individual reflection through a safe and sharing Circle. As one faculty member put it: “The sense of shared experience and learning through sharing was powerful.” Another agreed: “I recall connecting in such positive ways to others who teach at the University...reflecting in large and small groups, journaling in each other’s company, and reporting out in a collegial and trust building circle.” Another respondent’s learning was “The notion of simply listening and being listened to and how powerful that can be.”

## Specific Practices

Faculty valued specific practices of the Study Circles, and incorporated them into their teaching. Their personal reflection and learning connected intimately to their teaching development. New practices included the use of more reflective time and activities. As one person said, “The study circle validated the value of reflection for me. I have continued to use Parker Palmer’s work in my teaching and in my professional life during times of change.” Another faculty member experienced the Circle as reinforcing her classroom reflective practice: “I always practiced reflection, but it has grown so much since I started Courage work.” A colleague wrote of changing classroom practice, because of the Circles: “I use to believe that more was always better and I now try to plan a little more time to think about what we are trying to learn in each class.” Others mentioned a variety of practices they now use, including “Some of the poetry and the touchstones when I begin a group have been very wonderful.” Another claimed a more long-range value of the Circles: “My ability to take what I have experienced and share it with my students who will in turn share it with their students.”

Participants found the practices applicable in situations beyond the classroom. They identified changes in their experience with family relationships and community endeavors. For one, the “Primary change has been in interpersonal relationships with colleagues.” Another

found the biggest change in “My relationship with my own children and learning to not judge, not try to fix, but help in ways of asking questions that will lead to their own discovery.” One response described work in the community: “I have been doing some Community development in my neighborhood. I have attended so many meetings that are total free-for-alls. I kept thinking of the reflective Courage model for meetings, so I have begun to introduce/suggest these ways...Rich discussions followed.”

## Attitudes

One of the powerful though less visible affects of the Study Circles is the nurturing and strengthening of faculty members’ own attitudes about their teaching. One respondent wrote of the “Necessity to acknowledge the complexity of teaching and learning. When I feel pressed and begin to forget, there seems to be an inner flicker of light, which resides in me as a result of the Courage experience.” Another reflected: “The courage work seemed to so naturally reinforce so much of what had been already a part of my teaching practice. The power of this as a shared collegial experience along with the ways of language and framing, including the Touchstones, has made me a better active listener, to both my students and to myself as a teacher.”

Another faculty member described a significant attitude shift: “Bringing the intentions of Courage work into my day-day routines has created more space for me to know myself and to appreciate myself. Knowing myself has given me a new sense of feeling competent, clear, trusting my judgment, and seeing my own importance in the context of the work I am doing.” One respondent wrote of the value of her experience in another way: “Parker Palmer’s writings and my retreat work created an opportunity for me to develop contemplative practices to support my own healing, to support my relationships with friends and colleagues, and to support my work as a teacher of aspiring teachers.”

## Part 4: Discussion

“In the harried, hurried world of the University, I need to set aside time and place to pause and reconsider why I do what I do.”

- Study Circle Participant

The comments of those registering for the Study Circles showed how eagerly faculty members wanted to talk with each other. They sought reinforcement and validation for their work and a way to reinvigorate their teaching. The comments once they participated in the Circles suggest the value of their Study Circle experience and the positive affects of stopping and listening to both

their inner teacher and their colleagues. Faculty wrestle, often alone, with important questions such as who we are and what we bring to our teaching. How do we balance gifts and challenges and our personal and professional life?

The comments of college and university faculty parallel comments and findings of previous evaluations of Courage and Renewal retreats and study groups, which have been done for programs attended primarily by K-12 teachers. Poutiatine’s (2005) research summary found that retreat evaluations consistently identify several long-term effects of participation in Courage and Renewal experiences. One effect is the development of professional teaching skills, such as listening, construction of hospitable learning environments, and the professional use of reflective practices. Another is the enhancement of certain teaching dispositions and attitudes, including improved personal and professional relationships and increased vocational and personal clarity of purpose.

Nollett (2009) found that teachers often transformed into leaders through what she calls the “critical reflection” in *Courage to Teach*, and returned to their schools renewed and prepared to give back in positive ways to life in their schools. They discovered latent leadership voices within themselves that led them to satisfying roles as teacher leaders. When deep, sustained growth through critical reflection forms the core of teacher professional development, teacher leaders find a way to emerge from within. These evaluations offer encouragement about the possibilities of supporting faculty members in difficult educational scenarios and enhancing their development of agency and leadership.

Teaching at any level tends to be an isolating and highly pressured experience. College and university faculty are facing additional recent challenges, including institutional financial difficulties, increasingly complex student issues, and expanding technological expectations. O’Reilly (2005) suggests the challenge for many faculty is “to maintain an open heart, not to close in cynicism and self-protection” (p. 71).

Faculty member needs and challenges often relate to the stage of one’s teaching career, whether new, mid-career, or seasoned. Austin (2010) offers specific examples, saying that those new to teaching require orientation and initial support, including welcome into a collegial community and support to find balance and time for the competing demands of their new positions. Midcareer faculty often reassess their priorities and goals and experience stress in assuming more leadership, service, and often administrative duties. They may have difficulty maintaining enthusiasm for work and meeting the challenges of new technology. Seasoned professionals face these same issues, plus deciding when to retire and what legacy they will leave their institution.

The participants in the Study Circles were divided evenly between mid-career and seasoned educators (ten/twelve), with a small number of new and adjunct faculty (six). The most complete survey responses came primarily from the mid-career participants, which suggests these faculty members found the Study Circles the most valuable. As experienced professionals these faculty appear to find great value in a process that supports them to slow down, reflect, and listen deeply to themselves and others.

O'Meara and Terosky's (2010) research found that a key element of faculty retention and satisfaction was in institutions that created webs of support and learning. Workshops, conferences, webinars and other professional development options that focus on content and pedagogy are necessary and helpful. At the same time, Study Circle participants' comments support Chickering's (2006) contention that

To create educational environments and the relationships among students, faculty members, student affairs professionals, and administrators that strengthen authenticity, purpose, meaning, we need to go beyond mastering a large repertoire of teaching strategies or the rich potentials of emerging technologies. We need activities that strengthen our own authenticity, that clarify and strengthen our own sense of purpose, that help us engage issues of meaning, with others and ourselves (p. 202).

Faculty development opportunities can provide support in this important part of professional life, creating experiences for what has recently been termed "transformative conversations" by Parker and Zajonc (2010). The qualities that come up repeatedly in the Study Circle survey provide two key requirements for these experiences: Reflection and Community.

Reflection in teaching practice usually refers to the process of setting lesson goals and then reflecting afterwards, using more or less specific protocols, about what worked and what didn't. The process enhances and develops important shifts in teaching practice. This is valuable, necessary, and good pedagogy.

Reflection in Courage and Renewal focuses less on specific practices and more about "who" is teaching and what that person brings, needs, and celebrates. It is similar to what Korgathagen (2005) calls "core reflection," the ability to recognize, clarify and develop beliefs, values and personal mission in a vocational context. Such reflection offers faculty members the opportunity to gain clarity about their calling and to find ways to manifest that clarity in their daily work with students and colleagues. Study Circle participants sought, valued, and remembered this deep and personal reflection.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the value of community and they described specific qualities of that experience. They valued learning more about colleagues,

speaking freely in a safe space, and listening to others. They appreciated the touchstones as a container for how the group would be together. Effective community requires safety, shared honesty, and the chance to be vulnerable.

The practices that Study Circle participants valued and often brought back to their classes and meetings encouraged their students' own reflection. Some brought silence, other contemplative practices, or poetry into the classroom or faculty meetings. They set up touchstones or guidelines for the classroom or developed more open, honest questions to bring wonder and deeper inquiry into students' engagement with material. Several talked of taking time to listen more carefully to students and to each other.

## Conclusion

This study raises a number of questions for additional research. Since some participants came to more than one year of Study Circles, they may have been more positive about the experience than the group as a whole, so that results were skewed toward the positive. In fact, since faculty were invited to participate, those self-selecting were already interested in this type of experience and so were likely to find it rewarding. The planning group did not follow up with those who only participated one year, although anecdotally, teaching schedules played a role in determining who could attend. The study is also based on the experience at one university, and further studies could expand this to consider other types of universities, or other faculty cultures.

What is clear is that a large number of faculty were interested in this kind of experience, and a number of respondents found value and impact four to seven years after their Study Circle. There is a segment within the faculty body that values this approach, which serves to sustain their professional practice. It is an important component to consider in the overall faculty development offerings.

Faculty came to the Study Circles hoping for the opportunity to reflect on their teaching and to be part of a supportive community. The comments and longer-term experiences of participants suggest the importance to faculty members of having time and space to reflect on their teaching, especially their own strengths and challenges, and to do so in a safe, invitational, collegial atmosphere.

The reflective component of faculty life, of coming to know oneself more fully as a teacher can be added to the development programs for faculty in colleges and universities. Building time and support for core reflection is critical for educators to connect with their deepest, authentic selves and for building connection from that self to students and subjects. Such a program offers regularly

scheduled time for faculty to meet and engage in reflective activities and discussion. The time together follows careful guidelines that set a respectful, safe environment. The process includes engaging materials, carefully designed questions, and a clear and supportive structure. The principles and practices of the Courage Study Circles meet these requirements for a renewed and re-energized faculty. Such faculty members create authentic connections within and between themselves and their students, enriching and deepening learning in colleges and universities.

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