

Creating Spaces of Inquiry and Disruptions: Narrative Insights into a Reading Group

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an autobiographical study of six university educators/researchers who participated in an ongoing four-year reading group focused on the writing of pragmatist scholars. In order to highlight key distinctions among well-known forms of reading groups and the reading group under study, we differentiate between these groups. Drawing on a table metaphor for engaging in dialogue as outlined by Arendt (1958) and Greene (1988), we highlight selected fragments from our dialogues in order to discern seven central features of the reading group. As narrative inquirers, we live, tell, and re-imagine stories to live by in relation to the different books we read, as well as with each other. Being a chosen community (Lindeman Nelson, 1995), we share underpinnings of what makes this reading group sustainable, and generative, as we view reading and engaging with each other as a form of re/search. Our work as a reading group became a way to create spaces of inquiry and to dwell within disruptions.

Keywords: autobiographical, community, narrative inquiry, pragmatist scholarship, reading | group

Awakening to feelings of imbalance: In search of a table

Jean remembers vividly the phone conversation with Lee: a morning conversation for Jean on Canada's west coast and an afternoon conversation for Lee in Montreal in eastern Canada. They spoke of feeling unsettled and concerned for sustaining who they were, their stories to live by, in their new places. Lee was in a new academic position; Jean had recently retired. As participants in the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development (CRTED) at the University of Alberta for many years, they both yearned for conversations that furthered their inquiries, conversations that kept them thoughtful and awake.

Lee: When I left the Centre and then left the University of Regina for McGill University, I left family, friends, traditions, and routines. The move was filled with excitement and a kind of road energy. At first, I thought I could stay in touch with people through telephone and virtual conversations, but I now see how difficult that is. A couple of years into this new place, I realized something was missing. That's why I called. Can we think together about what has gone missing for me?

*Jean: I miss the Research Issues Table at the Centre, a place of dialogue that asks each of us to bring our ideas, our research, and our writing to a table that connects us as we work on our ideas. I wonder if we lean into what we're each experiencing and find ways to create something new that could sustain us. Maybe a reading group where we read a book together slowly, over time, and talk about resonances that help us think about our contexts, our teaching, and our research. I was just talking with Vera about wanting to read Erin McKenna and Scott Pratt's (2015) book *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present*. Maybe we could ask a couple of other people to join us and help us imagine new ways to sustain ourselves in these new places.*

It was, as we lingered in our uncertainty about our sense of dis/ease, about what had gone missing, that we began our reading group focused on the writings of pragmatist scholars. The discomfort we were feeling was a loss of the relational in learning and inquiry. Our attention to one another's lives was deeply embodied through our common experiences at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education (CRTED) at the University of Alberta where there was a relational space called Research Issues, a weekly table gathering to share research ideas. Each author had personally experienced Research Issues, and was yearning to find a similar space in our current institutions. We wanted spaces that allowed us to attend to our lives as well as our research. We were not prepared to leave our lives at the door, but instead perhaps to make our way, moving *with* our reading, *with* our inquiries and *with* each other.

For our reading group, we were able to design a space that allowed us to meet virtually once every 4 to 5 weeks. We began in early 2017. We read one to two chapters of a book selected by our group and read prior to our meeting. We then spent an hour in our SKYPE or ZOOM call discussing our reading.

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We did not record the meetings, nor did we take specific notes in regards to what was happening. We each, however, wrote notes in the margins of the book, highlighting key ideas that spoke both to our lives and our current teaching and research.

As we look back at our reading group experiences, we see, in hindsight, the ways it is different from other reading groups. In this paper, we first describe what our reading group is not by highlighting four other well-known kinds of reading groups. We then show something of our experiences in the group by sharing fragments of our conversations. We illustrate how our group drew on a metaphor of a table inspired by Arendt (1958) and Greene (1995). Finally, we discuss seven features of the ways our reading group that disrupted dominant narratives of independent scholarship and sustained our research and lives.

Searching for something else: Realizing what we are not

NOT A JOURNAL CLUB

Jean first became attentive to journal clubs when she and her colleague Marie Cave from the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Alberta reviewed the history of journal clubs in medicine. They learned that medical residents rated “the teaching of critical appraisal skills as the most important goal for a journal club” (Alguire, 1998, p. 365). They were not surprised to learn that physician-learners were “interested in learning skills that help them distill the most salient information from the medical literature”. They learned that journal clubs were a way for physicians “to keep up-to-date with the research literature” with a view of applying “optimal research evidence in clinical decision making” (p. 365).

NOT A CRITIQUE GROUP

Lee recalled hearing one of his doctoral professors say that “Writing Papers is essentially a martial art. You need to hone your craft and your arguments so they cannot be defeated by others. One way to do this is to critique others’ work”. Groups that formed with critique at their heart were focussed on helping individual researchers improve their academic writing skills. While Lee learned that such groups could be helpful in honing research writing skills, there was a competitive edge, not only around individual’s texts, but also around the critique. Participants became defensive and many also felt vulnerable.

NOT A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Reflecting on her experience teaching in K-12 public schools, Simmee recalled being part of different Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) which were framed by questions around how to collaborate as a school community to meet shared goals. Outcomes were the driving force for PLCs and frequently provided the content for school-wide professional development. The purpose of PLCs is commonly described as building the collective capacity of teachers’ professional practice (Admiraal, et. al, 2019). Targets or accountability pillars are often the measure of success.

NOT A BOOK CLUB

Pam is a member of a long-standing book club composed of members who are professionals drawn together by their love of books. Each month a novel is selected, read individually, and discussed at a meeting in a social atmosphere which includes food and conversation about everyday events. Diverse books are selected with no threads that circumscribe choices. Each member takes an individual book reading journey, anticipating a book discussion at the next meeting.

Leaning into uncertainty to shape a reading group

While we did not explicitly set out to create something different, we knew our purposes were not focused around gaining expert up-to-date knowledge, honing academic writing skills, or building shared visions in order to write a paper, a grant or a book. Lingering in the midst of uncertainty about how to sustain ourselves personally and professionally, our reading group was an attempt to find ways to disrupt the institutional narratives that were not sustaining who we each were, and were becoming. We yearned for an adventure, a playful and thoughtful engagement with ideas we could explore in relation to our lives, and work, and one another. As our reading group unfolded in organic ways, we recognized how we were disrupting a dominant narrative of efficiency and productivity with a broader and richer narrative of growth as human beings. We engaged with a spirit of inquiry and “what if” .

JUMPING IN: TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT, WHY, AND HOW WE ENGAGED

The group began with Lee, Vera, and Jean. We invited Pam and Simmee, members of the Centre community to our conversations within the first year. More than a year ago, Adria, a doctoral student from Barcelona, who briefly visited the Centre, joined us. As we wrote this paper, Adria reflected:

It's my first time in such a community. I don't know what to expect and I don't know what others are expecting. Reading has always been an individual activity for me. I never had to account for what I read or understood. It was a private and complex relationship with the writer. But this time I felt different. I had to say something, not just be present or participate. I felt compelled to give something back to the others. Because not knowing or not being sure is encouraged, wondering, questioning, or not answering are part of my experience.

While Adria framed these observations within the context of joining the reading group after the group had begun, his observations resonated with all of us. We were not explicit about our process; we did not intentionally set up spaces to be silent; we did not intentionally create spaces where we could contemplate our discomfort or uneasiness. It is, as we write this paper, that we name some of our processes.

TURNING TO A TABLE METAPHOR

As we made sense of our group, we found ourselves turning to a metaphor of a table. Wilson (2003) reminds us that both Arendt (1958) and Greene (1995) draw on a table metaphor to highlight the

importance of dialogue. For Greene, a “self is only authentic if it is involved in continuous dialogue with other selves and other perspectives. Possibilities need to be explored with others” (Wilson, 2003, p. 218). Greene’s (1995) ideas about the importance of dialogue in order to open up possibilities for thinking otherwise was a key idea at the Research Issues table at the CRTED.

Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Men in Dark Times* (1968), showed the importance of creating spaces of appearance, public spaces for dialogue. Response groups serve the purpose of creating spaces of appearance as public spaces in our narrative inquiry work (Caine, Clandinin, & Lessard, 2020). In describing resonances between narrative inquiry and the creation of public spaces, Jean and Vera highlighted how Arendt’s notions of friendship are important in understanding response groups. For Arendt (1968) “friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world” (p. 25). In conceptualizing spaces of appearance as spaces of friendship, Vera and Jean showed that, within such spaces, we could see who we are in our “willingness to act and speak at all” (Arendt, 1958, p. 186). In our willingness to act and speak, we are able to insert ourselves into multiple worlds (Lugones, 1987).

While Wilson (2003) helped Jean and Vera link Greene’s metaphor of continuous dialogue to Arendt’s notion of the creation of spaces of appearance as public spaces, they also saw the importance of understanding friendship within such spaces. Greene picked up on Arendt’s thinking

by emphasizing the imagination’s central role in linking the creation of public spaces [...] with the capacity to choose and imagine alternatives to those choices. Greene’s public spaces may seem small and local with Arendt’s polis; however, Greene has shown successfully, I think, how the occasions for acting with imagination are with us every day. (Wilson, 2003, p. 220)

When Jean and Vera shared these ideas with the reading group, we began to examine the ways we saw our reading group as a space of appearance, a public space, marked by imagination in which we could, each of us, begin to imagine otherwise in the contexts of our academic lives. Despite being in geographically diverse places, we saw ourselves as coming together around a metaphoric table that was situated amidst public spaces - where the borders were metaphorically porous, where our ideas, our knowledge, and our practices in relation to pragmatist scholarship brought other worlds to the table.

A STORY FROM THE MIDST: RE-THINKING ROOTS

By the time we wrote this paper we had engaged with 5 different texts: McKenna and Pratt (2015) *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present*, Pratt (2020) *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*, Addams (1902) *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams (2002) *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, and Addams (2010) *Twenty Years at Hull House*. We did not have a pre-selected of books prior to starting the reading group, but had a keen interest in pragmatism and those scholars who had been working within this theoretical tradition. As we read one book and engaged in conversation, we turned to other books.

After reading McKenna and Pratt’s book, we turned to Pratt’s earlier writings. Initially we were interested in Pratt’s exploration of the ways the work of pragmatist philosophers was interwoven with

the ideas of Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. One day in 2018, more than a year into our meetings, Lee read Pratt's words out loud in our group. We often read to each other, pausing as we talked about why particular ideas resonated with us. It was in these moments that we all made scribbled margin notes in our individual book copies.

Rather than seeing Native American thought as irrelevant, I propose that we see it as the starting place of some of the distinctive aspects of the American philosophical tradition, as a way to answer the problem of origins. By tracing the career of the central commitments of pragmatism beginning in Native American thought, through their use in resisting exclusion, racism, and sexism to their emergence in the work of the classical pragmatists, these ways of acting in the world can become renewed resources. (Pratt, 2002, p. 9)

Lee: As you know, I am working on thinking about colonial logics, (re)-indigenization and the language being used to think about the history of colonialism.

Jean: It seems to offer a different way of thinking about how Native American thought was taken up by American philosophers. I wonder how it fits with the work of Linda Tuwai Smith on decolonizing. Does it suggest that the early pragmatists co-opted Native American ideas?

Pam: On p. 15, Pratt notes that McDermott described the frontier "as an interaction" that "is better viewed as a borderland and a region of complex relations". On page 16 he writes "borderlands are regions of colonization but they are also regions of decolonization".

Lee: If indeed Native American thought is infused in how we see the world today, where does that leave us in terms of colonial logics and binaries that become created between settler and colonist?

Simmee: I imagine what it might mean to attend to "the experiences of the borderlands, geographical and intellectual" (p. 15) where Western thought has gained much of its "character and complexity." Where does knowledge come from, and how much knowledge is informed and shaped by Indigenous peoples? What Pratt is showing us is that while much of where knowledge comes from seems to be taken for granted or credited as being Western knowledge and beliefs, there is much to consider about the borderlands.

As we are all involved in teaching and research in contexts of decolonizing and re-Indigenizing academic institutions and dominant narratives, Pratt's work offered something different with considerations of borderland spaces. While many of us knew Anzaldúa's (1987) work on borderlands and Clandinin and Rosiek's (2007) idea of borderlands, Pratt offered us something a bit different when placed within the context of relationships. Around the same time we read these texts, Vera, Jean and Simmee, were working with Sean Lessard and Elders Francis Whiskeyjack and Isabelle Kootenay, to write about their work with Indigenous youth. They intentionally invited Elder Francis and Elder Isabelle into conversation and in those conversations, it became apparent that relationships and friendships were central to their understanding. Elder Isabelle's words still resonate "*this staying together is staying together through kindness, not because we are useful to each other*" (Lessard et al.,

2020, p. 1-2). Reading Pratt's work opened up possibilities for seeing borderlands as places of friendship and kindness.

RE-CONSIDERING RECIPROCAL RELATIONS

In the first two books, there were many references to early feminist pragmatist scholar Jane Addams. Pratt (2002) linked, in a chapter on early feminist pragmatists, the work of Maria Child who "adopted the logic of home as it emerged in Native traditions" (p. 250), with Jane Addams. Home is a central idea in many of our lives and thinking about the logic of home in the way Child did, challenged us to (re)think women's lives in relation to the "effects of difference upon place" (Armitage, 2003, np). We had, for some time, been intrigued by feminist pragmatists as they called us to think about the social and political consequences of our work. We excitedly turned to Addams's (1902) *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Lee read a short passage.

Wounded affection there is sure to be, but this could be reduced to a modicum if we could preserve a sense of the relation of individuals to the family, and for the latter to society, and if we had been given a code of ethics dealing with these larger relationships, instead of a code designed to apply exclusively to relationship obtaining only between individuals. (Addams, 1902, p. 46)

Lee: This passage really resonates with me. I saw links between the individual and collective that came up so often in Pratt's Native Pragmatism.

Jean: And I was really struck in the chapter on Household Adjustments about households. "The ethics held by them are for the most part the individual and family codes, untouched by the larger social conceptions"(p. 48). That tension between personal ethics, like an ethic of care, and a social ethics is present. I think this fits with what Pam, Vera, Simmee and I wrote on relational ethics and Noddings' ethics of care (Caine, Chung, Steeves, & Clandinin, 2019). One does not displace the other but there is a kind of tension between them.

Lee: This tension reminds me of what we are doing in the reading group. There seems to be a responsibility to the group, the community, to ensure we are ready to respond to each other in thoughtful ways. We give something back to the group. It illustrates the many codes of ethics that help us think about how our work within our group enhances our teaching, research, and our practice which, in turn, gives us a sense of being connected to something bigger, which Addams refers to as society.

Vera: Addams also writes of a theory of reciprocity. In Twenty Years at Hull House, she writes "The social relation is essentially a reciprocal relation"(1923, p. X). I wonder how this sense of social ethics is also a reciprocal democratic thread, which weaves its way through our professional knowledge landscapes and calls us to act in certain ways.

Jean: Drawing on Addams' temporal understanding of experience, I recall how our experiences around the Research Issues Table shaped our understandings, not only of research, but of how collaboration can look different in academic settings. In many ways, this story of collaboration

makes visible a relational ethics and a sense of reciprocity. Yet, it bumps hard with the dominant stories of academia that narrate themes of competition, individuality, and silos of knowledge.

Pam: Perhaps part of what pulled, and pulls, this group together is the valuing of this different story of collaboration that includes relationships that are attentive to both professional and personal knowledge landscapes. Vera, your comment around Jane Adams and reciprocity as essential to social relations takes me back to Pratt's book and the 'indigenous attitude' practiced in the welcoming acts of wunnegin. Respect is built into the Indigenous attitude but the historic events in America at the time showed the welcoming offered by the Indigenous peoples was often not reciprocated.

Simmee: I wonder if this valuing of reciprocity is part of what makes this group different. Perhaps it is also this notion of reciprocity and the interplay between an ethics of care and relational ethics that calls us to be attentive to lives in our work as narrative inquirers.

Adria: This is interesting, as I wonder about how each of us acts beyond our meetings. I have been listening to your thoughts and wonders about the words of Jane Addams. Her words resonate in different ways for all of us. How do her words shape us and how do we weave our lives with the ideas of Jane Addams. When I look at my work I can see that her words are affecting the knowledge landscape that my students and I co-compose; I am much more awake to the social ethics I and others live.

After *Democracy and Social Ethics*, we turned to Addams' books: *Long Road to Memory* and *Twenty Years at Hull House*. Her work was drawing us in. In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams (1923) wrote autobiographically of her early childhood and early undertakings which inspired her to establish a settlement community in which she could live alongside children, women, and men. Addams shares story fragments of people she came to know at Hull House and how these experiences transformed her way of thinking and being. Pam read the following piece from Addams (2015):

I learned that life cannot be administered by definite rules and regulations; the wisdom to deal with a man's difficulties comes only through some knowledge of his life and habits as a whole; and that to treat an isolated episode is almost sure to invite blunderings (Addams, p.54).

Simmee: I thought about this in relation to Addams' telling of her assumptions about a man who came to Hull House, a father of two children who sought employment at Hull House. As his story unfolds, I sense Jane Addams' vulnerability and humility as she acknowledges her feelings when she suggested this man work in the canals even though he thought he could not endure the conditions. He took the canal job and died days later from pneumonia. Addams' self-facing reminds me of our relational commitments as narrative inquirers.

Pam: Addams is not afraid to share experiences that troubled, and implicated, her. By sharing from the whole of her experiences, not just from the 'shiny ones,' she continually teaches us gently that there is more than meets the eye, in every human life.

Vera: I'm thinking about how she portrayed immigrant men, women and children living in poverty at a time and place that was moving toward efficiencies, industry, and capitalism, with

little regard for the lives of those who were treated unjustly by the impact this had. The insertion of the physical place of Hull House into the midst of this became a kind of counterstory that Adams and others living at Hull House created many initiatives leading to greater social justice for the lives of people they encountered there. It makes me think of Arendt and the idea of acting, just beginning somewhere, taking initiative and creating a public space. A space that could act as a place of resistance.

Simmee: I think about how Addams later writes of an elderly woman who clung to a piece of furniture, her dresser, before she was placed in a "poorhouse." Addams sought to understand her life as a whole and the importance of a sense of belonging that was possible through material belongings connected to her life. I think about my parents who abruptly had to move from a small town into a seniors' home in the city. In the move, they lost most of their possessions. At the time, I didn't understand why my mom wanted to still keep her tattered things. Reading this chapter makes me think about my arrogant perceptions as Lugones (1987) might say. I am beginning to see both my mothers' desires and my actions differently.

These brief exchanges around a piece of text show how the reading group is a meeting point in which knowledge comes from different experiential backgrounds and flows into our conversations. Our knowledge lingers, messing with our personal and professional worries and contemplations. We understand that knowledge is dialogue, and takes many forms, not just the shape of theory. Knowledge is narrated in the shape of a conversation, amidst uncertainty in which wonders, imagination, playfulness, and silences are part.

Reading group as table space: Central features

In our reflective and reflexive turn on our experiences, we drew from the readings and from our conversations to discern central features of our reading group and the ways in which the readings and the conversations around the readings help us come to deeper understandings of our lives, our research, and our pedagogies.

1.

Experiences of the reading group
help us think more and
also make space
to disrupt our practices
to imagine differently.

We see ourselves as puzzling together, not with the intent of trying to teach each other but with the intent of opening ourselves to otherness, to uncertainty, and to other ways of knowing and doing.

2.

Our relationships are friendships
as Arendt sees friendship
entering each meeting with a sense of unfolding lives
in, and over, time.

Conversations sparked by the readings are filled with wonder and playfulness; there is a sense of puzzling together. Our attention expands from what we say to who we are. We each hold on to the theoretical views of the author in a dialectical relationship with our own minded practices. We encourage each other to think about what we are reading in relation with our practices and with our own lives.

3.

Not outcomes nor indicator driven
no deliverables to focus on,
or to live up to,
no articulated product to be gained
but a commitment to something bigger,
yet unnamed, outside of us, and in the world.

There is a creative nature to the ideas with which we play. We are not reading to change practices. But, sometimes unexpectedly, reading changes how we think about practice. We understand that moving towards a more democratic world will happen slowly and in relation. It is not just the intellectual work that matters, it is our lives that matter. Our shared histories as narrative inquirers shape our heartfelt persistence and imagination.

4.

Our shared histories of becoming narrative inquirers,
experiences at the Research Issues Table,
bind us.

Conversations that arise as part of our reading are layered with this history.

New ideas and wonders weave through readings, and through our experiences as narrative inquirers, and our lives. Shared commitments as narrative inquirers connect us in rich relational ways enabling dialogue that is playful, exploratory, and grounded in our experiences. We hold on to our shared

regard or esteem for each other, allowing, as Arendt (1958) makes clear, each person's voice to be heard at the table.

5.

A chosen community
or community of choice.

We each enter this space being part of found communities, larger communities which give us a particular language, culture, home (e.g. academic spaces and other affiliations). Our reading group is a chosen community (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) marked by decades of friendships, collaborations, and mutual understandings of relational ethics. There is trust we can reflect on our personal and professional identities, not just in relation to the texts we read, but to each other. Amidst the dialogue, we tell, retell, and at times, re-imagine stories to live. In this way, we come to ponder new possibilities and counterstories to disrupt some of the dominant cultural, societal, and institutional narratives within found communities.

6.

A generative community
shaped by our conversations about what we are reading.

When Mary Pinkoski (personal note, 2020), a doctoral student, sent the following note to Jean, she drew our attention to what matters in our reading group.

Reading is not an easy endeavor, Horton (in an article by Kincheloe, MacLaren, & Steinberg, 2012) continued, for to be a good reader is to view reading as a form of research. Reading becomes a mode of finding something, and finding something, he concluded, brings a joy that is directly connected to the acts of creation and re-creation. (np)

Horton's words are suggestive of the generative way we have read in our group. While Horton helps us see the importance of reading as a form of research, something that sustains us, when we read and discuss the shared texts, we are also engaged in retelling aspects of our lived practices. This relational landscape helps us to disrupt and challenge who we are and what we do.

7.

Thinking with experience
always part of thinking philosophically
of thinking with theory

rather than applying theory

allowing a kind of dialogical relation between experience and theory.

Our reading group is a place of inquiry where we can pause and wonder, connect and reconnect our readings and our lives. In drawing from the diverse experiences and perspectives of everyone in the group, we see the beauty in plurality by realizing other ways of understanding something. Our conversations are enriched, moving around and about in generative ways as we revisit and reimagine the ideas, stories, and temporal contexts in our “fields of play” (Richardson, 1997, np).

Returning to the beginning: In the midst of uncertainty

As Lee and Jean first talked about the uncertainty we were feeling about who we were and were becoming and about how we could sustain our stories to live by in unfamiliar new places, we wondered about the possibilities of a reading group. When Vera, Pam, Simmee, and Adria joined us, we lived out, in imaginative ways, a reading group. Leaning into the uncertainty and seeing it as a site for inquiry into ways to disrupt the taken for granted dominant narratives that structured universities, the reading group has sustained us for several years. As our group progressed, we came to see it as a kind of table, drawing on the work of Arendt (1958; 1968) and Greene (1988;1995) as well as on our experiences at the Research Issues Table at the CRTED. In this inquiry space, “the table itself moves” (Wilson, 2003, p. 209) as we are moved by the literature we read, and also called to ponder other ways of knowing and being through the interweaving of the narratives we live, tell, and retell. The reading group has become an imaginative place for our growth as post-secondary teachers, researchers, and human beings, to continue to become educated in the way Greene (1988) in *Dialectic of Freedom* describes. For Greene, the education of individuals is linked to freedom, to being “provoked to reach beyond themselves” (p.12). Our reading group moves toward such a place.

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