



PART ONE

*Guidelines for Individual
and Group Study*



Teaching is a vocation that requires constant renewal of mind, heart, and spirit—if we want to avoid burnout, take joy in our work, and grow in our service to students. As we seek renewal, there are two primary sources to which we can turn: the inner teacher who speaks in solitude, and the community of fellow teachers. The guidelines in Part One are intended to make the resources of both solitude and community more accessible to teachers in quest of renewal.

The issues raised by *The Courage to Teach* require us to practice openness and vulnerability, with ourselves and with each other, virtues that rarely receive their due in professional settings. We need guidelines for reflection and discussion that encourage us to explore our inner landscapes in a deeply respectful way, a way that encourages the soul to come forward and speak its truth.

What follows is not to be read as a manual of techniques for reflection; teaching and learning cannot be reduced to technique. What follows are reminders to walk quietly, remain observant, practice listening, and stay open to discovering the important truths that inhabit the inner landscapes of our lives.



IF YOU ARE NOT a teacher, when you find references in this *Guide* to “teachers” and “teaching” or “learners” and “learning,” replace those words with whatever language applies to your profession. The materials in this *Guide*—like many of the insights in *The Courage to Teach* itself—can be translated into any line of work where it is important to connect who you are with what you do, to “rejoin soul and role.”

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

If you are studying *The Courage to Teach* solo, you doubtless know how you want to proceed because you know what works for you. But for whatever they may be worth, here are some reminders that may prove useful as you get under way.

Physical space is more important to reflection than we may understand—especially after spending years in educational

institutions, which are notoriously insensitive to the impact that physical settings can have on the human spirit!

Try to find a place where you feel comfortable, one that is free from both distractions and interruptions. Some people can go on retreat by closing their office door and turning off the phone. Others need a space where there are no reminders of work to be done. Others need neutral turf where they can “disappear” into anonymity—a public library or a coffee shop. Still others need to be in a natural setting. Find a space that feels hospitable to you, and claim it for yourself.

If you are working through this *Guide* alone, one of your major challenges will be setting aside a scheduled time for reflection—and then holding to it. You may want to choose a regular day each week when you can protect at least an hour or two to reflect on your life as a teacher. Choose a time of day when you are the least likely to face other distractions—perhaps early in the morning before the pace of the workday quickens or late in the evening when your world has slowed a bit.

Once you have chosen a day and time, put it on your calendar and treat it as responsibly as you would treat any other commitment. If we take seriously our commitments to other people—as we would if we had a faculty meeting on the calendar—why not take our commitments to ourselves with equal seriousness?

Try to use your reflective time for just that—reflection rather than preparation for reflection. Prepare by reading the chapter you will be reflecting on a day or two before the time you have set aside to reflect. It might help to take some notes or make a journal entry about your reading as well. Let the material “steep” in your mind and heart before you explore it more intentionally. By preparing before reflecting, you leave more time for genuine “inner journeying,” for listening openly to what your inner teacher has to say.

GROUP STUDY

At the heart of *The Courage to Teach* is a pivotal image of teaching: “to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.” *Truth* is defined as “an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.” If you are convening and facilitating a group inquiry into the book, your goal is to prepare

a space where the “community of truth” can be practiced around the issues in the book itself. (For suggestions and materials for convening a book discussion group, see Appendixes A and B.)

Membership and Leadership

The idea of community scares some people away because they fear getting caught in something that will add pressure to their lives. So it is important to be clear at the outset about the level of commitment each participant is willing to make to the group and about the proposed duration of the group’s life. If some participants desire a long-term group, establish periodic checkout points, times when people can decide to rejoin or leave, guilt-free. Long-term groups will eventually face the question of whether, when, and how new persons may join—a question that requires thoughtful consideration in groups that have worked hard on creating “safe” space with each other.

Community is a dynamic state of affairs that is not anarchic but requires leadership at every turn. While it is possible for a group to hold fruitful sessions without formal leadership—sessions in which participants share such leadership responsibilities as maintaining the boundaries of the space, keeping it open for all to participate, and dealing creatively with conflict—it is often helpful to have one person designated to facilitate the process. This may be the same person each time, or the role may rotate. You might want to discuss this issue as a group and reach consensus on what leadership pattern suits your group’s needs.

But whether the leadership role is designated, rotated, or jointly shared, its purpose remains the same: to create a teaching and learning space centered on the great thing called teaching. By giving thoughtful consideration to the shaping of that space—in its physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions—you can help create an environment supportive of reflection and renewal.

Physical Space

If you have a choice of meeting places, ask yourself which one feels most like the space required for a community of truth. If it is possible

to meet in a noninstitutional space, such as someone's home, the quality of conversation may deepen considerably. But even if your choice of meeting places is limited, there are simple steps you can take to create a physical space that promotes open and honest dialogue.

Make sure it is a private space on which you can close the door and not be overheard by others, a place where you will not be bothered by telephones ringing or fax machines beeping. Try to arrange for comfortable chairs, warm (nonfluorescent) lighting, fresh air, and a comfortable temperature. Sitting in a circle helps foster good discussion—a circle unbroken by intervening tables or desks so that participants are not barricaded but have a sense of access to one another.

Some of the activities in Part Two involve writing, so remind people to bring notepads or journals. If refreshments are possible, perhaps provided by a different person each time, they can enhance the sense of community. If it suits your style, a lighted candle at the center of the circle will enliven almost any space.

Intellectual Space

A good teaching and learning space is created, in part, by a tension between conceptual boundaries that keep the group focused on a topic and the openness necessary to allow them to explore that topic. Review the chapter you will be dealing with. Which of its concepts constitute the essential boundaries of the topic on which you want to focus? How can you introduce those concepts clearly and compellingly while still leaving room for participants to expand them and bring their own ideas to the table?

Of the questions and activities supplied in Part Two of this *Guide*, which ones seem most appropriate to your group? Which might best serve as preparatory exercises before the session, and which would best be introduced once the session is under way? What questions and activities of your own devising might help the process along? Are there newspaper articles, poems, art, or music that might stimulate ideas in the group?

Think about the participants individually, and ask yourself what they need to be brought into this sort of inquiry. Do they need

a chance to reflect silently in a journal before speaking, or would it be better to go directly to discussion? Do they need small-group discussions followed by a large-group dialogue in order to give everyone “airtime,” or would large-group discussions suffice? Do the discussions need to be ends in themselves, or would taking minutes and creating some sort of record or report make the work more valuable for some participants?

A safe intellectual space encourages participants to listen and respond respectfully to each other’s thoughts so that everyone can express their thoughts openly, without fear of personal put-downs. This does not mean that there can be no disagreement or debate; on the contrary, the safety to engage in creative conflict is a crucial test of good intellectual space. But it does mean that we need to deal with contentious topics in ways that leave no one feeling mistreated.

Though those “ways” have more to do with the spirit of the discussion than with technique, there are methods that can help—if the spirit is right. For example, you might have participants write about the topic you wish to discuss on three-by-five-inch cards, stating their views on the issue and leaving the cards unsigned. Collect the cards, shuffle them, redistribute them to the group, and then ask each person to read aloud what is on his or her card and comment on its content for no more than two minutes. Not knowing whose views one is commenting on tends to make the comments more measured—and an initial go-round of this sort can till the soil for a more open and yet respectful discussion.

These suggestions for creating intellectual space reflect the premise that a good teacher does not fill the space so much as open it up for others. As the facilitator of your book study group, try to ask rather than tell, to explore rather than advocate, to wonder rather than know, to trust that people are thinking and learning in silence as well as in conversation.

But the task of keeping the intellectual space open and safe should not belong to the facilitator alone; it needs to be shared by the group. At the first meeting, invite participants to create a list of ground rules for good dialogue, so that some of the issues we’ve noted here can be addressed before they arise—rules such as “Make space for everyone to speak” or “State both what you agree with and what you

disagree with when you respond to someone.” If you use such rules as a checklist, asking the group to assess its own behavior against its own norms at the end of every session, the group will keep itself healthy.

Emotional Space

Exploring our identity and integrity as teachers requires us to tell the truth about our feelings. But it is difficult to overcome conventional norms that reward us for suppressing that truth, for keeping the conversation on the surface of our lives. So while it is important to create a space that is hospitable to ideas, it is equally important to create a space that is hospitable to feelings. Indeed, it is arguably more important, for in a space that is hostile to feelings, it is unlikely that either intellectual or emotional truth will emerge.

As the facilitator of your book study group, you can help foster emotional hospitality by listening attentively, asking good questions, offering supportive words, and practicing a nonjudgmental attitude. If the emotional space is being shut down by harsh responses to others’ ideas, remind people that it is possible to speak for ourselves without speaking against others.

Try to ensure that everyone in the group has a chance to participate. For example, create a ground rule that no one can speak more than five or six times in a given hour. If that feels too mechanical, stay alert to how many people have spoken, and if a few are dominating the dialogue while others are silenced, wait for a pause and say, “For the next little while, let’s make space for those who’d like to speak but have not yet had a chance to do so.”

Creating an atmosphere of dignity and regard for each participant is, of course, crucial. People are more likely to be open with each other if they know their voices will be heard and their contributions respected. An indirect way of establishing that ethos is to invite people to introduce themselves anew at each session via a meaningful but nonthreatening question: “Tell us about an older person who has been important in your life” or “Tell us about a powerful learning experience you’ve had, in or out of school.” It is a simple fact that the more one knows about another person’s story, the less possible it is to dismiss or disrespect that person.

To encourage emotional honesty, it is essential that participants commit themselves to confidentiality. In fact, in the retreat program called the Courage to Teach, we ask participants to honor a rule of “double confidentiality”: nothing said in the group will be repeated outside the group, and members are not free to approach each other after group sessions (to clarify a point or offer advice, for example) unless they are invited to do so. The assurance that one will not be pursued, cornered, and counseled after a gathering makes it easier to speak one’s truth.

Spiritual Space

A spiritual space is one in which the inner teacher can speak its truth and have a chance to be heard. How do we create such a space? By learning not to invade each other’s solitude in a vain and alienating effort to advise, save, or fix each other up but instead learning to practice simple receptivity and listening of the sort that allows people to listen more deeply to themselves.

In our culture, the approved response when we hear almost any sort of problem is to offer advice that will “fix the problem.” Unfortunately, this reflexive fix-it response often makes the person who shared the problem feel unheard and dismissed. Indeed, our tendency to offer fixes stems from the desire to distance ourselves from the person with a problem: if you take my advice, you will be fine, and I don’t need to worry about you anymore; if you don’t take my advice, I have done the best I could, and I can forget about you and your dilemma.

The soul doesn’t want to be fixed; in fact, it flees and hides when pursued by a “fixer.” The soul wants only to be welcomed, attended to, and heard by people who are willing to offer it simple hospitality. You can help make this possible by instituting and enforcing a group norm against trying to fix each other. Be clear with group participants that unless someone specifically asks for advice, you are not gathered to solve each other’s problems but to “hear each other into speech,” to cultivate seeds of possibility in each other’s lives without worrying about whether or how or when those seeds will grow.

There is a simple behavior that can help us avoid our tendency to try to fix each other: we can learn to ask honest, open questions instead of giving gratuitous analyses or advice.

An honest, open question is one that I ask you without believing that I know the “right” answer and without hoping that you will give me the answer I have in mind. If, for example, I ask you, “Have you ever considered seeing a therapist?” it is probably not an honest, open question. In all likelihood, the question reflects my belief that you should see a therapist, and even as I ask it, I am probably hoping that you will agree.

An honest, open question might be, “Has anything like this ever happened to you before?” If so, “What helped you deal with that situation?” “Are there insights from that experience that might be helpful to you now?” With questions such as these, it would be hard for me to have a “right” answer in mind and to be hoping that you will give me that answer. The motive behind questions such as these is to help you reflect on yourself rather than to convince you to see things my way or any other particular way.

Asking honest, open questions is obviously not the only useful or acceptable form of group discourse. There is always a place for sharing information, for respectful disagreement, for creative conflict over ideas. But honest, open questioning is a discipline that can help your group at those vulnerable points where community tends to self-destruct—and to shut down the voice of the inner teacher—by becoming invasive rather than supportive of the soul.

There is one more group discipline that can open space for the soul to speak its truth, one that can be especially useful as a postlude, or even prelude, to a difficult conversation. Gather the group in a circle and settle into silence. Tell them that they are free to speak out of the silence whenever they wish—to speak from their own center to the center of the circle—but are forbidden to respond directly to another person. Everyone is free to speak his or her truth, but no one is free to comment on what another person says. Given this protection, people feel free to share fragile insights or struggles that might not be voiced if they thought they were going to be rebutted, corrected, or even affirmed. Under these conditions, we learn to give the soul the deep listening and receptivity that it wants and needs.

Six Paradoxes of Space

As you think about creating the various forms of nonphysical “space” that will help your group do its work, you might want to recall the six paradoxical tensions of pedagogical space named in *The Courage to Teach* and use them as a checklist:

- The space should be bounded and open.
- The space should be hospitable and “charged.”
- The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.
- The space should honor the “little” stories of the participants and the “big” stories of teaching, learning, identity, and integrity.
- The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of the community.
- The space should welcome both silence and speech.

Indeed, you might want to review the book’s full discussion of these paradoxes (see “Paradox and Pedagogical Design” in Chapter III of *The Courage to Teach*) as you prepare to gather your group. You will find there clues for the creation of the kind of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual space that invites and encourages the “community of truth.”

The Clearness Committee

The clearness committee is a specialized and demanding process of discernment that is neither necessary nor appropriate for every individual or every group. However, if someone in your group is struggling with a particularly difficult issue and, after thoughtful consideration, feels that this might be helpful in the search for inner guidance, you might want to offer your group the opportunity—in fact, the privilege—of participating in a clearness committee.

Rightly done (and it is critical that it be rightly done, because it invites people to make themselves vulnerable and promises that they will not be exploited in the process), the clearness committee teaches

us how to help each other with problems while avoiding the arrogance of believing we can “save” or “fix” each other. It offers a deep experience of a form of community in which we neither invade each other’s integrity nor evade each other’s struggles. Many people report that the experience has led to significant changes in their personal and professional lives.

An overview of the clearness committee is found in “Ground Rules for Dialogue” in Chapter VI of *The Courage to Teach*. But if you wish to use this process, it is important that you spend time with Appendix C of this *Guide*. There you will find vital, step-by-step guidance for holding a clearness committee, whose principles and practices you need to study, understand, and embrace before offering the process to others—who themselves need to study, understand, and embrace the principles and practices that make this approach the extraordinary experience it is.

Touchstones for Creating Safe Spaces

The following “touchstones” were created by the Center for Courage & Renewal as guides for creating the safe spaces that we call “circles of trust.” (See Appendixes D and E for further information about the Center and its retreat programs.) Keeping these touchstones in mind and sharing them with your participants can be helpful as you plan and lead your *Courage to Teach* book discussions.*

- *Extend and receive welcome.* People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle, we support each other’s learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- *Be present as fully as possible.* Be here with your doubts, fears, and failings as well as your convictions, joys, and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.

* The first version of this list was developed by Judy Brown, a Courage & Renewal facilitator, in 1994. Her original list of five items has been expanded through the contributions of other facilitators during the past decade. This version, edited and revised by Marcy Jackson and Parker J. Palmer in August 2006, incorporates many of those contributions.

- *What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.* This is not a “share or die” event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- *Speak your truth in ways that respect other people’s truth.* Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one’s truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting, or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using “I” statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- *No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight.* This is one of the hardest guidelines to follow for those of us in the helping professions. But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- *Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions* instead of counsel, corrections, and the like. With such questions, we help “hear each other into deeper speech.”
- *When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.* If you feel judgmental or defensive, ask yourself, “I wonder what brought her to this belief?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?” Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- *Attend to your own inner teacher.* We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions, and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- *Trust and learn from the silence.* Silence is a gift in our noisy world and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- *Observe deep confidentiality.* Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.

- *Know you can get what you need.* Participate with the knowledge that it is possible to leave the circle with whatever it was you needed when you arrived and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

We hope that these guidelines will help you create the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual space to encourage deep reflection and real renewal. We know that this work is not easily done. But we also know that when teachers are able to come together in a space that has these qualities, the benefits for us as persons and as professionals are considerable—and the ultimate beneficiaries are the students we are committed to serving.

