

# Welcome

A fine critic observed — "Civilization ... can be reduced to the word *welcome!*"<sup>[1]</sup> In that spirit, Welcome to a human effort, to one without limit or ending. Here we study our civilization with free, expansive expectation. Here's an open door, step through to universal, voluntary study.

Come on in! *A Place to Study* has room for all. Not just a quick look — we're here to study, which takes time and concentration. And don't expect wondrous things simply to happen here. Study comes with effort as we do things, as we make them take place. We study. What? Lots and lots, but each must find their own way. There's no program, no lessons, no tests. We don't give anyone anything to mark some completion, a task achieved, an expectation met. We each decide what to do, choose how to do it, and judge the value and meaning it has for one self.

Come on in! It's a *place*, a place to study. It's an expansive place with wondrous districts to explore, complex persons to meet, interesting ideas to discuss, beautiful works to contemplate—far more than any of us, as a living person, can ever exhaust.

Some may visit now and then, others might set up as life-long residents, all will enrich the possibilities, but each will only scratch the surface. It's like a big city, like the one we love — brash, resourceful, at once demanding and giving, stylish and plain, energetic, with something for all.

Come visit, and stay as you like, playing your song. Here civilization sings, *welcome* to life. Both are Jazz, a pulsing, melodic improvisation — freedom in the face of necessity.

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



### Dialogs

## Let's make it work

### Hello. . . .

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## Work with the NavBlock

## To study? . . . Is that for real?

1. Stanley Crouch, Jazz (Ken Burns, Producer, New York: PBS, 2001, Episode 4, 0:43:15. [On citation](#))

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# Yes! We study.

From classical Latin, *studēre*—to strive after, to concentrate on, to support, favor, to apply oneself, to give attention, be eager, be zealous, take pains, be diligent, be busy with, be devoted to. . . .

Sometimes I feel amazed, working to create *A Place to Study*. To study! Who would have thought?

*Study*—the word, entered my vocabulary in elementary school, maybe yours too. Remember how around 4th or 5th grade, you stopped staying in one room with one teacher and started going to different rooms with different teachers for different subjects. Some days there'd be a gap, with a *study period* covering it up. There we learned to sit quietly, cloaking our idleness with the appearance of attending intently to some make-work assignment. And on through the system, study as make-work continued. It fell far short of the ancient expectation.

To grasp the actualities of study, let's think back to before we experienced the collateral damages of systematized instruction. We have all shared richer experiences of *studying* in a full, authentic sense, albeit without the name, as we wended through the perplexities and play of childhood, youth, and on into the fullness of life. Study began for each of us as "the baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion."<sup>[1]</sup> Study begins at birth, a drive to make sense of all the confusion.

It's extraordinary to watch how many moves, and sounds, and sightings, and textures catch an infant's attention as she draws herself into her growing sphere of perception and action, as she cracks the codes of speech, studying how to coordinate lungs, larynx, tongue, and lips over many months to shape gurgles, howls, and babble into intelligible talk. Each of us began to discriminate and associate, to disaggregate the confusion into glimmers of coherence, meaningful order, a world in which to grow, play, create, and interact with others. The human condition requires we each make sense of the world, for we spring to life, inchoate and ignorant, encompassed by its vast, glorious puzzle within which we must maintain ourselves — doing that is the heroic epic that life uniquely scripts for each and every person.

From the start, *study* is a vital function. Every living entity lives as a self-maintaining process, sustaining itself with and against circumstances — the pressure of dead forces and vital actions pressing in on us. Most things are not alive, not living entities; they just exist, buffeted by the external forces playing upon them. Living creatures do more than exist; they *live*, they interact with external forces, improvising capacities to act vis-à-vis exigencies in an effort to form

themselves as active influences shaping their world. Human beings, over a long succession of generations, have improvised complex cultural powers with and among which we have augmented our physical capacities to cope with all that impinges upon us. Each person partakes in that cultural self-empowerment, but must do so starting from *primal ignorance*: at birth, each is inchoate physically and entirely unformed culturally.

Our primal ignorance does not consist only in our not knowing how to do what we want and need to do. In addition, and more importantly, primal

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**A Place to study**

The diagram is titled 'A Place to study'. It features a central green circle labeled 'Tools'. Surrounding this central circle are six smaller colored circles: 'Who?' (pink), 'What?' (pink), 'Why?' (yellow), 'How?' (purple), 'W h Where? n' (pink), and 'Dialogs' (orange box). The entire diagram is set against a light blue background.

**Lifeworlds**

**Dialogs**

**Let's make it work**

**Hello. . . .**

- [Welcome](#)
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**Work with the NavBlock**



ignorance consists in our not knowing what, all things considered, we can do, we might do, or we should do. And no matter how much we learn how to do things, that primal ignorance of not knowing what we can, might, and should do sticks with us.

We emerge into our lives, into the activities of self-maintenance, without our powers or purposes laid out for us, knowing neither *what* we can do, nor *how* we can do it. And whatever *what* and *how* we choose to try, we must try it *where* and *when*, at this time and place that the ever-moving *now* calls us into action. We must try, invent, improvise, create it as we go along, uncover and disclose how we will maintain ourselves in the midst of circumstance. We have no checklist of possibilities given to us, clear and evident, pointing out the path. Study becomes the engine of self-formation as we chart our path through our primal ignorance, working out what we can and should do to maintain ourselves as self-maintaining, living persons.

1. William James *The Principles of Psychology*, I, 462.

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# Why a place to study?

Don't we get enough education? Most everyone *has been educated* in a worldwide system of formal instruction — some to succeed, others to fail. Helping more to succeed in the system and fewer to fail is important, but not the aim in creating *A Place to Study*.

What we get from our formal education is important, but far from sufficient. Our lived experience assesses our education in the school of life. That goes on till death and it's up to us to make it good enough, personally and collectively, to suffice for our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

Our personal circumstances provide each with a base, a unique mix of abilities, limitations, and resources. We don't know exactly what they are, but nevertheless we have to work from that base within a larger world, a world that wobbles, fortuitously shaking up the circumstances in which we each live, continually forcing us to use our judgment in coping with things uncertain and unexpected. In seeking to live well, that larger world requires that each pays it some attention as each prepares to act within it. And the wobble is pretty bad.

- We harbor a pervasive racism, resentment, and complacency in our civic life that subjects large groups and many persons to persistent indignity, degradation, and abuse.
- We celebrate an economic system that is chugging out of control, over-producing, remunerating unjustly, distributing product inefficiently, and fouling the habitat with destructive bi-products.
- We stoke technical innovation as the highest source of good in the world, beneficent in all its consequences, even the unintended.
- We compete blindly in politics with weak, hard to manage rules, shirking the tasks of governing the civic whole and ripping ourselves apart through blind battling for power, heedless of its use.
- We communicate by contagion with novel affordances, oblivious to the potential effects on who says what to whom for what reasons and with what results — a chirping babel passing as voices to make us great again.
- We educate "universally" through a monoculture normed to serve and reward those who most closely conform to it, as if that system truly and fully anticipates all the vicissitudes of life.

We live at risk, each and all in a condition of substantial ignorance. The affordances of culture, which provide us with a precarious agency in life, adjust and re-calibrate as the scale of complexity actually at work in the encompassing lifeworld ratchets up.

This emergent complexity does not simply add to culture a new layer of sensitivity and skill as a tree adds a new ring of growth to its trunk. Rather, the significance and use of all the parts of the culture change with unannounced actuality. We perceive the cultural dislocation taking place through the discernible wobbles, but we feel it in our inner sense of life as an intensifying doubt, both tacit and explicit, that we are condemned to live our lives without meaningful agency, isolated specks of awareness buffeted into incessant motion by forces independent of our will.

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[Work with the NavBlock](#)

Recognizing that, how should we make wise choices? That's the question we can and should examine, each personally and together, in common. That's why we study, and to facilitate that purpose, we construct a place to study.

*A Place to Study* offers no solutions, no packages, no planned and vetted paths. It offers each a place to reflect, to inquire, to think, and to study as each sees fit in the company of others with resources that suit the task.

1. *The education of Henry Adams, Chapter VII: Treason (1860-1861),*  
(¶183)

## Henry Adams on educational accountability

The picture of Washington in March, 1861, offered education, but not the kind of education that led to good. . . . Not a man there knew what his task was to be, or was fitted for it; every one without exception, Northern or Southern, was to learn his business at the cost of the public. Lincoln, Seward, Sumner, and the rest, could give no help to the young man seeking education; they knew less than he; within six weeks they were all to be taught their duties by the uprising of such as he, and their education was to cost a million lives and ten thousand million dollars, more or less, North and South, before the country could recover its balance and movement.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## A Place to Study is NOT . . . .

- **NOT an encyclopedic project.** Like an encyclopedia, *A Place to Study* consists in part in an extensive collection of culturally valuable assets. But people interact with its collection, not to acquire impersonal knowledge, but to further their self-formation and liberal learning, aspiring to a personal understanding of themselves and their circumstances.
- **NOT a formal educational institution.** We grant no certificates, diplomas, or degrees; we charge no tuition or fees; we have no instructors or professors; we set no curriculum, prerequisites, or admission requirements. People come to study on their own initiative, striving towards their own fulfillment. All are welcome — novice, expert, and everyone in between.
- **NOT a collection of on-line courses or test prep.** We do NOT provide tutoring or a trot correlated to typical courses or curricula, high school or college, and we do not charge subscription fees to students, families, teachers, schools, or organizations. Persons come here, not to jump through the hoops of advancement, but to find and fulfill their unique capacities measured as each sees fit.
- **NOT a library or a museum, in the ordinary sense.** Here we build collections of text, documents, and other things, and provide an online workspace, but with a somewhat different spirit — less to avail our collection to a general public and more to facilitate its collaborative use advancing self-formation and liberal learning among interested persons.
- **NOT a self-help or how-to site.** We are **NOT** a resource for finding specific answers to explicit questions or help in acquiring specific skills, although we provide a listing of [Self-help & how-to sites](#). One comes here to expand, diversify, deepen, and control the questions, to figure out what it is that one does not know.
- **NOT a subordinate to a sponsoring organization.** We don't generate revenue for corporate owners. We don't cater to a special demographic, we broker no commercial exchanges, and we hype neither celebrities nor

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**A Place to study**

**Lifeworlds**

**Tools**

Who? What? Why? How? Where?

**Dialogs**

**Let's make it work**

- [Welcome](#)
- [To study, is that for real?](#)
- [Why a place to study?](#)
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**Work with the NavBlock**

influencers. We are an autonomous, collaborative community of peers seeking to find and fulfill our humane purposes and and meaning.

## ***A Place to Study serves those who. .***

..

... those who study as persons seeking to form ourselves and learn liberally in the digital commons. We work through our first-person awareness of life, as we respond aspirationally with the ever-diversifying self-awareness of the seeker finding a way through life. In this sense, "Who are we?" evokes many responses, among them. . . .

... those who, through good fortune and hard effort, have benefited highly from formal instruction and enriching experience.

... those who, through adversity and inadvertence, have not benefited from formal instruction and enriching experience.

... those, advanced in age, having enjoyed the perks of the system, who worry that it can no longer nurture the values and abilities that drew us to it.

... those who feel consumed by the stresses of high consumption, and wish to assert, "Enough!"

... those who prefer the examined life to the packaged life, and those who want to start examining packaged lives that are failing to deliver on their promise.

... those who are young in years or spirit and who want to sustain consistent, meaningful purpose through the complexity of circumstance.

... those who see the admission of ignorance as the threshold of wisdom.

... those who recognize ourselves as spanning both advantages and adversities and work to realize our possibilities without taking pride in the advantages or feeling resentment at the adversities.

... those who see ourselves as unique variations on a common theme and wish to realize that uniqueness for the benefit of all.

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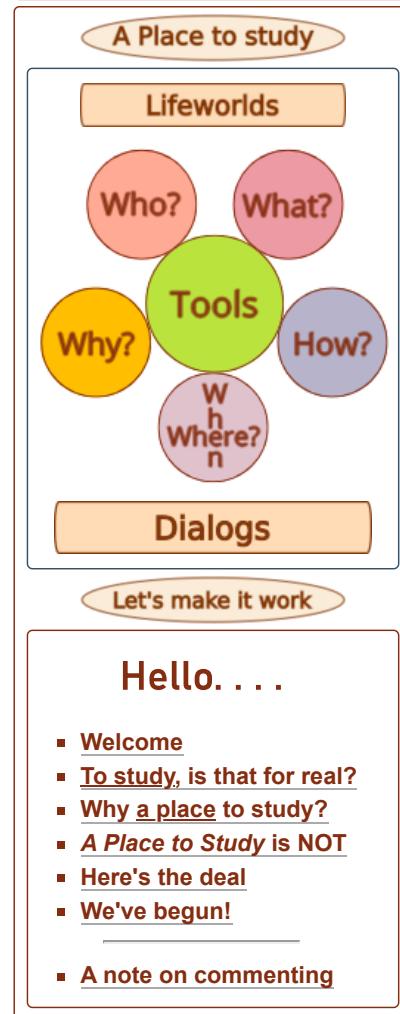
# Here's the deal!

Volunteers build *A Place to Study* to provide cultural resources to persons seeking self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons.

Persons freely study with these resources to form what they have to say and do in the context of their lives and their world, seeking to fulfill themselves through their place in it.

Together, we seek to make *A Place to Study* and its uses as free, as unencumbered, as comprehensive, and as open to all as we can make it.

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<sup>1</sup>  
A person can casually enjoy *A Place to Study*, poking around in it looking for curious or amusing bits, but the design of *A Place to Study* does not aim at entertaining visitors, holding them between more taxing matters. We design to merit sustained, recurrent attention and effort from a broad spectrum of persons. We are not trying to give people whatever they like and want, or what putative authority says they need and should have. That rules out a lot and leads to an obvious question: What are we trying to do in designing *A Place to Study*?

<sup>2</sup>  
From time immemorial, humans have successfully expended their energies and acumen in creating an extensive range of ingenious cultural resources — copious embodiments of purposeful perception and action that facilitate and embellish their lives. From the start, people used states of matter — paint, wood, stone, paper, ink, and much much more — to store, organize, access, and apply these cultural resources for their use in conducting their lives. As these practices have developed, they have immeasurably deepened and expanded the scope and quality of life, while imposing a characteristic spectrum of possible activity attainable with them at any particular time.

<sup>3</sup>  
Now,<sup>[1]</sup> with unusual historical rapidity, humans have suddenly been creating novel means to use states of energy to store, organize, access, and apply their existing and emerging cultural resources in the conduct of their lives. As electronic processing displaces material reproduction, the scope and possible uses of human culture change radically, for better and for worse, in ways we can neither fathom nor anticipate. We find ourselves having to manage the human enterprise through this transformation with neither clear precedents nor well-charted direction.

<sup>4</sup>  
Many are insisting that what's changing amounts to no significant changes at all; others vaguely are foreseeing possibilities emerge that span the gamut from the glorious to the catastrophic. Let us, instead, recognize that our times are churning in confusing ways — perhaps a perennial recognition. Let us start admitting that we neither understand what's happening nor know what to do. That's the state of mind that calls for study, for quite reflections on the uncertainties at hand. Study begins through the recognition of ignorance, and *A Place to Study* begins in our recognition that we are all radically ignorant about who can do what with existing and emerging cultural resources stored, organized, accessed, and applied in states of energy.<sup>[2]</sup>

This page should probably be split in two: one page diagnosing the current juncture and a second on strengthening our capacity for agency in the midst of instability. The latter has been dropped entirely. It's best to keep introductory sections short and pungent.

5

We don't know what's actually taking place. We've seen over several decades an amazing digital network globally emerge, linking together most of us who are alive in potential person-to-person interaction. Most books ever written, most poems composed, songs sung, music played, pictures painted, laws passed, agreements made, and theories thought are there in clear digital representation to be consulted in an instant or two. Let's find out what we can do to deal with our fundamental concerns by working hard together as autonomous persons with powerful electronic tools applied to a full, well-organized assemblage of high-quality cultural resources.

6

But how do we navigate to our goal when we don't know exactly what we are looking for? As we ask that question, we *study*. When we know what we are looking for, we can ask someone to tell us about it, or look it up and learn about it. When we don't know what we're looking for, we have to ask a lot of questions. That's the purpose of our districts, not to give the answer, but to help us pose our questions

7

These questions do not result in our knowing something as the answer. They are questions that help us recognize and understand what we're looking for. What we recognize and understand through such questioning culminates, not in the production of knowledge, but in the formation of intention, purpose, and value that we can and should institute in and through our lifeworlds. We question — Who? What? How? Where/When? Why? — not singly, not in a sequence, but in a continuous simultaneity out of which recognition and comprehension emerge.

8

Confounded by contingency, we loose too easily our sense of agency.

## To begin, BEGIN

1. We try on *A Place to Study* to use many familiar terms with mildly distinctive meaning, *now* among them. Here, *now* signifies a category of the understanding that indicates rather variable duration, indicating the span of time within which something to which we are attending is taking place. With many matters of substantial historical significance, this understanding of *now* requires us to recognize that it started well in the past, continues apace in the present, and will not reach completion until some indefinite time in the future. As we work on *A Place to Study*, we will see increasingly the value of this recognition in reducing the tyranny of prediction and strengthening the case for acting in the light of valued possibility.
2. Yes, we could make other statements of fundamental ignorance, and these receive significant attention elsewhere in the world and in specific parts of *A Place to Study*. We proceed, however, with our ignorance about the historic implications taking place with the advent of electronic processing, not on the basis of foreknowledge of its primacy, but on the hunch that doing so can help bring important uses of cultural activity to fruition.

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# We've begun!

## What's next? That's always the question, an occasion for judgment.

Here's an overview for first-timers of *what-happens-where*, and for many-timers, too. What we do on *A Place to Study* differs from what usually happens on websites. We use a clickable map to keep the whole place in mind. Use it to get about and choose where your active study might take place. We describe the main districts here, but if you prefer to just look and see, skip the descriptions and use the schema to go exploring. Whenever wherever, clicking the top elliptical link [File:APlace.png](#) will bring you back here.

Remember our intent: to provide free, unencumbered, comprehensive *resources* to persons seeking self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons. Treat each *Place* page as a resource. Check it out and take it in, the actual study that takes place depends on what we then do, contributing what we have to say to the *Study* page or simply thinking a passing thought while moving on.

In the world of instruction, knowledge has a scope and a sequence; in contrast, study has a situation and an occasion. *A Place* situates it; our choice *to study* occasions it. We don't think of our schema as an ordered list to be followed from top to bottom. It's a visual composition, each part serving with the others to comprise a whole, each part distinctively significant within the whole.

Our schema has an upper and a lower part and the content of the lower part will vary, depending on what component of the upper part we activate. A circle of circles makes up the core of the upper part. The five outer circles link to our places of substantive activity — the museums, monuments, stadia, parks, schools, churches, offices, and fancy stores, so to speak. The inner circle links to enabling functions — the streets, the buses and subways, the sewers and conduits, warehouses and workshops, and the smarts that enable a complex infrastructure to never let our city sleep. Two reflective discourses frame all this activity, a set of dialogs and a discussion of lifeworlds, which may serve to institute the flow of diverse activities with a sustained sense of direction and coherence.

### To elaborate . . .

Through *A Place to Study*, we explore the spiritual aspirations that move us, personally and in common, in the course of life.<sup>[1]</sup> We do not live in the world, one world the same for all. Each vital agent lives in a unique world, inner and outer, that each constitutes as the circumstantial correlate to our intentions and capacities.

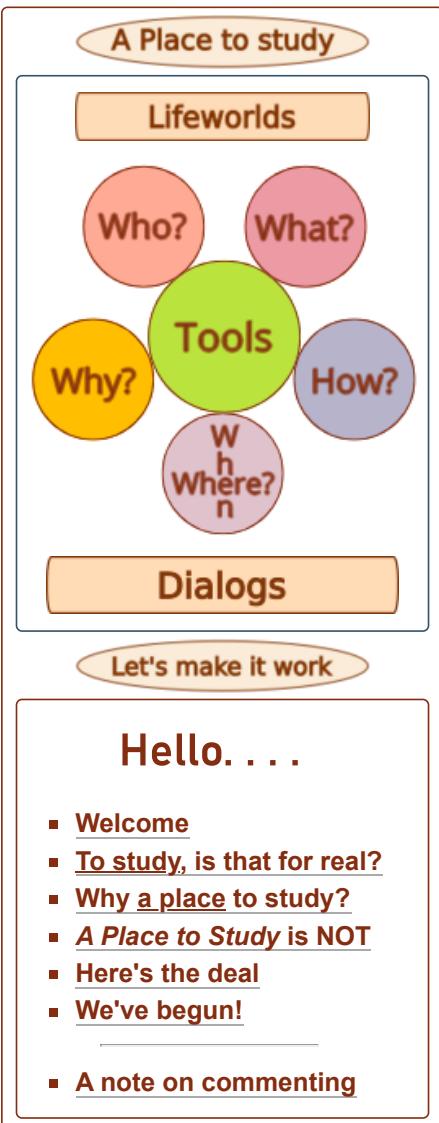
#### Lifeworlds

Our lifeworlds comprise the significance, meaning, and worth that we institute as self-directing agents in, for, and around ourselves as we seek to actualize intentions in living our lives. We study these matters in our lifeworlds to better inform our powers of judgment, taste, and understanding. These works of the spirit provide the experiential context of our studying.

#### Core questions

With intended action, living action, the outcome is always contingent, unclear, potentially ironic. As doubts, concerns, and possibilities of import to us take place, we inquire into them: *Who?*, *What?*, *How?*, *Where?*, and *Why?*. Hence our assemblage of circles, which indicate major modes of concentrating our attention on what we do not fully fathom and therefore want to study. By posing these questions to ourselves, we reflect

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discursively on key forms of the primordial ignorance that moves us to study here. They are places where we study *study*, so to speak. Here's a quick bit on each. They work together, so don't hole up in only one of them.



*Who studies?* — here on *A Place to Study*? Here "study" is an active verb.

As an active verb, it sounds awkward when used in the passive voice; *study* calls for an agent as its subject, a person or a polity, an actor that forms, performs, and pursues purposes. Here we study agency as agents, as persons, but persons deciding what they, personally and as members of collectivities, can and should choose to try to do.



What sorts of resources repay study by persons seeking self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons? Here, and in the district for *How?*, we substantively engage what the verb, *to study*, indicates by reflecting on the cultural resources with which we study (*the what*) and then on the active capacities we employ in doing so (*i-the how*).



How will we, as persons, engage in studying our cultural resources; how will we employ our capacities in doing so? That, too, calls for reflection, which we pursue in this district and then orchestrate as shared activities in the district that follows.

**File:Where n.png** Where? That's where the action is, where persons [*Who*] intentionally seek to form themselves and learn liberally in the digital commons [*Why*], studying resources of human culture [*What*] in the various ways suiting the complex conditions of human life [*How*]. Here we put in practice what we are thinking.



In engaging the complexities of life, why might persons pay particular attention to forming themselves and learning liberally in the digital commons? Responses to this question, framed by *each person*, not *for each or everyone*, have much to do with shaping the cultural import of what we can and should do here.

### Enablers

These are our places of public activity — the museums, monuments, stadia, parks, schools, churches, offices, and fancy stores. In addition, we have the streets, the buses and subways, the sewers and conduits, warehouses and workshops, a complex infrastructure that never lets our city sleep. All that is here too, and many visitors will get to feel at home in it. You'll see in the center of our schema three of them.



Everyone shapes themselves by gearing up, by selecting and using tools of various sorts to advance their purposes. Here's the heart of *A Place to Study* as a democratic effort: in a fully developed digital culture, everyone can, should, and will have full access and use of the most effective, powerful tools for creative cultural activity. That is becoming feasible in a fully developed cultural commons and it stands here as the compelling goal of democratic aspiration.

### Dialogs

*Dialogs* groups short instances of a literary form, not a special topic. It includes a set of conversations about aspects of *A Place to Study*

and the sort of activities that can and should take place on the site. They're like street corner conversations about the why and the wherefore of *A Place to Study*, and its place in the larger world. These are important for sensing the distinctive character of study as our effort to form our agency, purpose, and meaning in all the many domains of our life activity.

That's it. All these represent common foci of attention, loci jumbled up in the processes of life. They don't form a sequence and bouncing around among them continues through life as we form and focus judgment on the ever-changing vicissitudes of life. Explore as you wish, free to go as you want, and to come back

when you will — as the spirit moves you. We hope that'll be often, in active, intermittent residence — study takes place best in the company of others over extended time. But it's your choice — the incentives come from within.

1. On *A Place to Study*, we are unabashed about taking *spirit* seriously as the generative attribute of life, distinct from force and matter alone. Spirit is that mysterious capacity with which life functions, as a natural phenomenon by which it counters the 2nd law of thermodynamics, to construct ordered activity in the universe in non-random ways. Each living instance of life will succumb to the 2nd law, but so far, since its advent, life as a natural wonder has lived counter to entropy for nigh an eon. We define spirit as living agency. It works to create a cosmos from the chaos.

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# A note on commenting

## Why comment? Why well? Often? Thoughtfully?

Everyone suffers from mistiming. *She smiled; I saw it, but didn't notice. My school was OK, but my head was somewhere else.* Everyone suffers too from gaps in the structures of opportunity. Teachers and curriculum planners find it very difficult to fill formal instruction with authentic opportunities for student self-expression, yet the power to express oneself well ranks as one of the most important signs of a quality education.

Many do acquire well developed powers of expression through their educational experience, however, and many do not, but even at the high end of success, most would feel that as a matter of fact they could have done much better. And as one goes down the gradation of educational success, that matter of fact feeling will turn into one of regret, and then one of resentment at having been done wrong. By cloaking these differences in the rhetoric of meritocracy, without accounting for the degree of randomness in the data, opinion and procedure amplify these differences, which become complacency, alienation, and aggression, significant roots of personal and public distress.

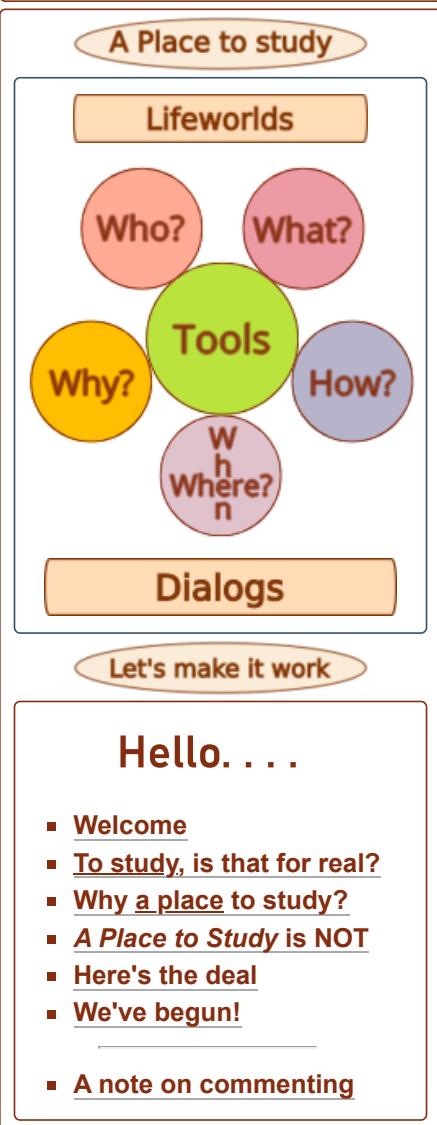
Accounting for all the random differences in the myriad of human experience far exceeds the most grandiose aspirations of big data. We can however, make a small but real effort to create random opportunities for self-expression that persons can then grasp as means to improve their powers of self-expression. For those whose capacities of self-expression are already highly developed, these opportunities will probably make small marginal differences, but going down the scale of prior success, the resulting marginal differences will increase and with enhanced zeal may increase substantially.

For opportunities to comment to strengthen our capacities for self-expression, we need to put real effort into them. We need to feel we have something meaningful to ourselves to say to feel the urge to say it really well. We risk in reading to read passively, waiting for something to knock our socks off — *Then I'll have something to say!* that's great, but it is important to work harder. Reading more actively, we read continually asking whether we have anything to say, not only as a first reaction, but on reflection. If so, try to express it well. Sometimes we may even really, really have nothing to say about something, but feel that we have something to say about that too. We read, not just to read, but to inform what we think, and we best test and clarify what we think, by trying to express it clearly.

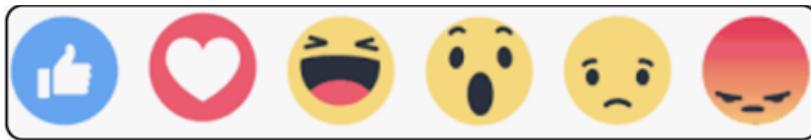
At times, we all feel, "But who am I to say what I think about this or that? I don't feel well informed. It's complex and I don't want to seem ignorant. It's controversial and I don't want to take the wrong side of things. etc. etc." We will always find a threshold always impeding the way; we develop our power to express our ways over, or around, or because of it. There's significance to our feelings of diffidence, to our naiveté, to our ignorance silencing me, to the inhibition of our willingness to frankly voice considered views. We can comment well by commenting on all those problems holding us back.

*A Place to Study* is not a place to comment reactively, however. Likes and reactors do little to develop our powers of thoughtful self-expression, but then much of their ambient content leaves one with little to say. Demand better.

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[Work with the NavBlock](#)



Throughout modernity, the steady dumbing-down of work has dehumanized multitudes in the name of efficiency and expedience. In post-modernity, the exploitation of leisure in the name of giving us what we like threatens a yet more crushing wave of dehumanization. Use it or lose it. We must stand up and use our intelligence, judgment, and capacities for meaningful communication. Those peddling cultural resources through which we can only grunt and growl, thinking that amounts to participation in a democratic culture, will reduce us all into pliant herds to be prodded in whatever direction the commercial and political powers deem expedient. Each voice matters. We all should learn to use ours well.

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# Work with the NavBlock

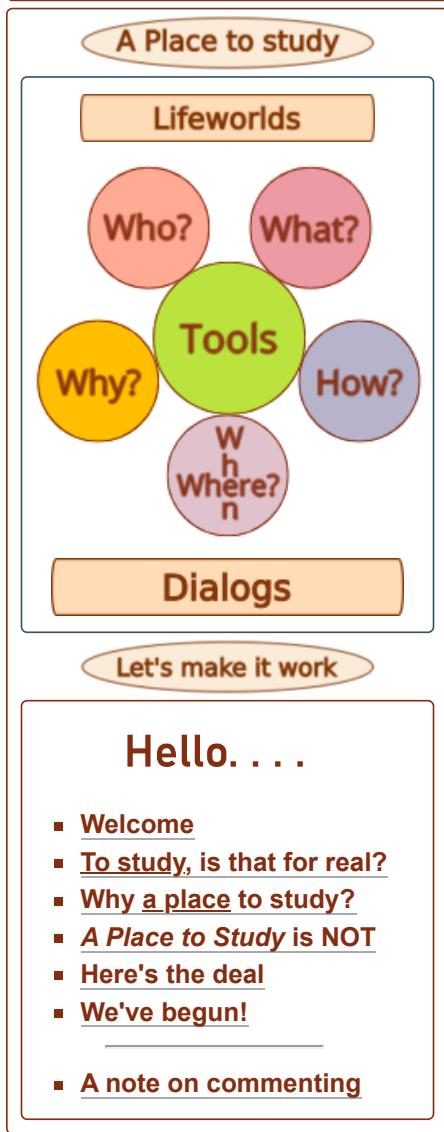
Don't expect *A Place to Study* to be encyclopedic, a compendium of knowledge about things. If you're interested in up-to-date knowledge about *what something is*, look in Wikipedia. Come to *A Place to Study*, not to know about *the world as it is*, but to think about how you intend to live in a world imbued with meaning, significance, value, import — *the world of our intentional lives*.

This interest in intentional life, our personal agency, informs the way we work with the NavBlock. What you see now is not the tip of a topical hierarchy allowing you in a few quick hops to hit the topic you want. Intentional life does not primarily concern identities; rather it involves agency. The NavBlock works as a set of controls. You'll always find it at the upper right of every page — the driver's seat from which you steer wherever you go. Key elements are five questions basic in our thinking about intentions — why? who? what? how? where/when? They surround a link to tools, digital resources that we can use in seeking to fulfill our intentions.

Our intentional lives involve each of us as a whole persons, and on *A Place to Study* the NavBlock stands continually at hand with which we each of us can and should work the whole site as whole persons. We do not seek set items of information — bingo, be gone! The intentional life continues, sustained by curiosity, aspiration, hope, interest; spurred by need, concern, anxiety; directed by discernment, purpose, value; attracted by beauty, joy, and love.

In a life of study, we try to form ourselves and express what we can can should become in the community of peers. The NavBlock enables *A Place to Study* to facilitate that effort.

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Please note: As a concept, *Lifeworld* has great importance for the design and development of *A Place to Study*. We need to put the project in motion, however, in order to work out the modes of interaction between actual persons living and working in different lifeworlds and the resources accessible to them through *A Place to Study*. This process of emergent design may result in significant changes in the structure and function of *A Place to Study*.

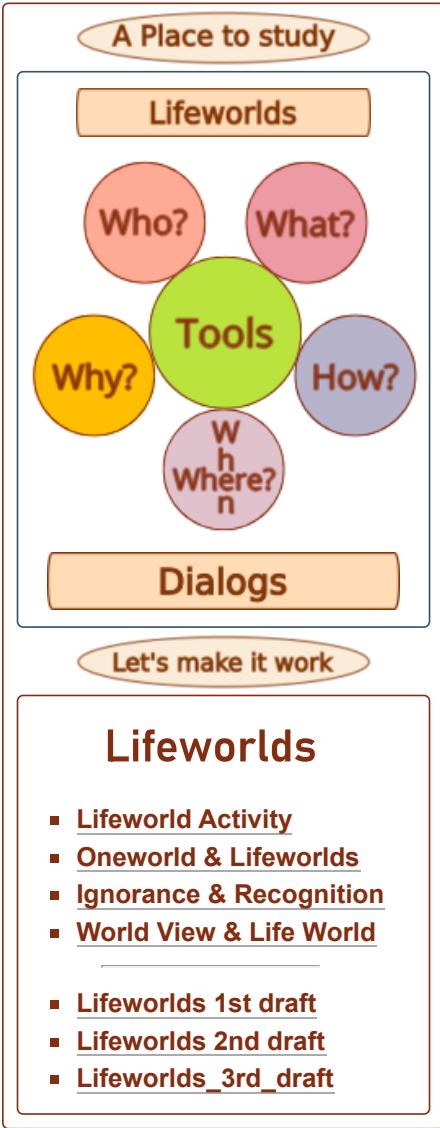
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# Lifeworlds

A Lifeworld indicates the activities of a living agent, as that agent lives them, not as an external observer views them. We speak of a lifeworld as seating, instituting, and rendering the actuality of phenomenal experience. A life takes place in its lifeworld; lived lives happen in and through its lifeworld.

Why don't we just speak about *the world*, plain and simple, without qualifying it as *the lifeworld*? Isn't the world always there, waiting for us with look and listen? But as soon as we start to think about the presence of the world, we recognize that the greatest proportion of it is clearly, always, out of sight, far beyond ear shot. And even what's right here before my eyes, looks very different to you, before your eyes over there. At the very least, the world right there before us brings many relativities and obscurities with it.

Through much of cultural life, context served to make sense of many perspectives on the world. And clever thinkers sent ingenious effort to find precisely what was common to all the appearances.



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# Lifeworlds 1st draft

## Some thoughts

Consider the changing balance between the same-for-all world and the unique-for-each world. We can switch back and forth between the two with ease

Let's start with a story about "Life and the World." Big topic. But don't worry. We'll keep it short and simple.

Once upon a time, a long time long ago, there was the world, better the stuff we call "the world," included in with lots of other stuff, a whole universe of it.

We do not live in the world, one world the same for all. Each of us lives in a unique world, an inner and outer world that each constitutes as we form our capacities and pursue our intentions. The same-for-all world presents some peculiar problems. It's actually very difficult to find, to touch, or to run and jump in. It's an abstract world, one we construct. Over countless generations, all around that huge abstract world, humans have learned

Let's start with our own lifeworlds, those of persons in diverse 21st century circumstances possibly channeling substantial effort through *A Place to Study*. In addition to much else, we are constructing them to help ourselves and others who want to form themselves and learn liberally in the digital commons. We're seeking to do that pretty simply by facilitating their assembling and studying lots of cultural resources and inviting them to reflect with each other about how that furthers their purposes.

Nothing constrains us to do all that and external incentives are not motivating us to do so. We have questions to ask.

- Why should we consider these purposes [helping ourselves and others who want to form themselves and learn liberally in the digital commons] to be worthy of special attention, personally and collectively, living in the contemporary lifeworld?
- [File:ToStudy.png](#) Who can benefit from instituting them among their sustained intentions?
- What goals, personal and collective, long and short term, should orient effort through *A Place to Study*?
- How can we best use our capacities and energies through *A Place to Study* to achieve our purposes?

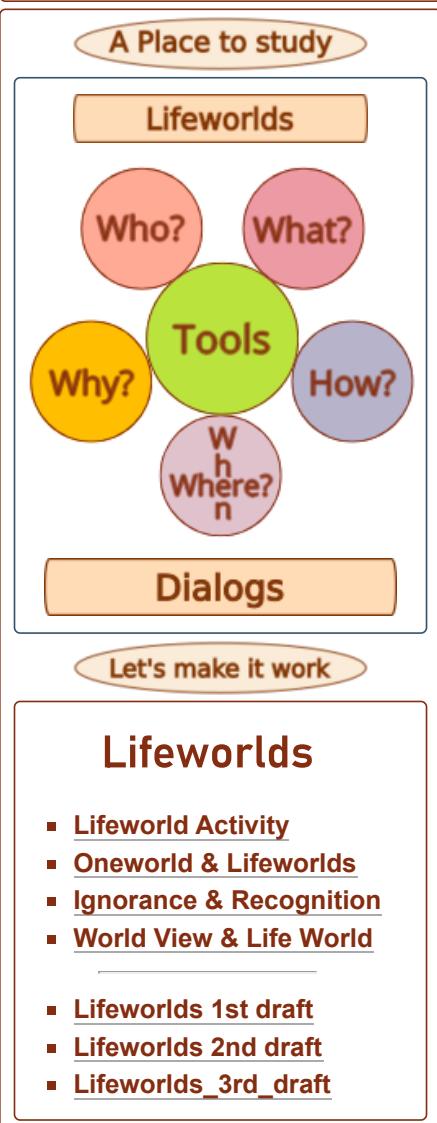
[File:ToStudy.png](#) [File:ToStudy.png](#) [File:ToStudy.png](#) [File:ToStudy.png](#)

- Given the press of circumstances, where and when can we actuate through *A Place to Study* the requisite energies to realize our intentions?

## Basic considerations

Let's consider our lifeworld by exploring it, not by asking what various thinkers — say, Edmund Husserl, or Alfred Schutz, or Jürgen Habermas — might have said about the concept. We're interested in the *lifeworld*, not with what authorities have said about it. Let's start with a basic definition and query it, not sure what we're looking for, posing our five questions —

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Let's breathe life into a small mammal as reptilian monsters go extinct in the midst of climate change and global catastrophe.

Develop: Given the scale of social effort devoted to the advance and dissemination of impersonal knowledge in the contemporary lifeworld, efforts to strengthen the

Who? What? How? Where/When? and Why? Let's do that to institute the concept into our personal agency. Then we might read the authorities to expand our comprehension of the concept by responding thoughtfully to what they have to say.

We can get a basic definition, going high with the OED — lifeworld signifies "the sum of immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of an individual, or of a corporate, life." Well, we say, this isn't very satisfactory. There's lots we ask of it in childish fashion, "What experiences, activities, and contacts are immediate?" the immediate . . . world?" And we might also ask in a bit more grown-up way, "What's a life, be it individual or corporate?" To the latter, we might begin by saying that the life consists in an active perceiving and effecting, and to the former, that an immediate world is one that the life actually perceives and effects.

So far, we've done pretty well unpacking our definition with our questions. We have a Who? — a life. We have a Where/When? — the world being perceived and effected. We have a How? — the way the world is perceived and effected. And we have a What? — the actual perception and effecting of the world. What we don't have is the Why?

"So let's go to it!" Can we situate more or less where we might find the "it" to which we propose to go? Is this a picky question? The phrase simply means, "Let's get going!" But even that can elicit a curious, "Where?" This too will probably seem to be a dumb or irritating question, for no location, no *where* seems implied by the phrase. Let's face it. Where we're going isn't all that self-evident.

When we study, we enter the *lifeworld*. But most of us, who *have been educated* to some degree, have largely lost sight about what the lifeworld constitutes, having grown accustomed to thinking about the world, pure and simple, understanding it to consist in what in principle might be knowable. With that idea, in part tacit and in part explicit, we understand getting a good education to result from our learning a sufficient, sound selection of what people currently know about the world and our place in it. But let's note something interesting about our lifeworlds: we're there thinking about what we know about the world and our place in it while our thinking all that — the world and our place in it — from within our lives

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A simple recognition animates our effort. Over past centuries the world around, formal education has developed into an encompassing system of formal instruction that encompasses everyone and serves to advance and disseminate the impersonal knowledge and skills requisite in their shared activities. This statement describes neither the explicit end of the system, nor all the means employed within it. It describes basic design principle integral to its formal operations: to design a causally effective program through which persons shuffle into groupings according to various characteristics and move through staged cultural experiences to receive curricular packages and assistance in absorbing them, routed by periodic assessments of their achievements relative to set expectations. with the expectation that they will manifest, . Everyone recognizes that their cultural experience encompasses more than impersonal knowledge and skill in using it

Work out and start drafting the new section on Lifeworlds. Can we formulate a general "pedagogy" for a person's life-long institution/constitution of meaningful self-actualization through the lifeworld?

formation of personal intentionality in the contemporary lifeworld [are important]. The mechanical reproduction of cultural resources has had a strong bias towards the cultivation of impersonal knowledge relative to the cultivation of personal intentionality. These biases diminish in a more and more fully digitized communications environment.

- Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change it*."
- In the lifeworld, we must always be aware that neither the end nor the means determines the outcome.

- In the lifeworld we must take care to differentiate linguistically from the objective world. Agents comprise the lifeworld, not objects, not even subjects. In the lifeworld, we speak of *persons* and *polities*, acting agents, not individuals and societies, objects of impersonal knowledge.
- The problem of lifeworld terminology that has gained currency in the discourse of impersonal knowledge, for instance, *to institute*, from Latin *instituēre* to set up, establish, found, appoint, ordain, begin, arrange, order, teach (see OED), largely has a form of action as its object, except that "teach" now primarily indicates imparting forms of knowledge.
- *Character, taste, judgment, etc.*, as lifeworld constituents. The study of *literature, history, art, music* as lifework concerns, distinct from learning about them as subjects of knowledge.
- In the lifeworld, continuously forming an *agenda* and attending to a *canon* becomes very important, understanding them as ongoing efforts to adapt agency to circumstance.

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# Lifeworlds 2nd draft

## A question File:ToStudy.png

What's talk about *lifeworlds* all about? We might start with a definition — "life-world *n.* . . . the sum of immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of an individual, or of a corporate, life; *spec.* in the philosophy of Husserl." Should we settle down for the next two years with Edmund Husserl's writings? That might be murky. Can we make sense of it ourselves? Life-world indicates the sum of immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of my individual life. How does that definition apply to each of us as living persons?

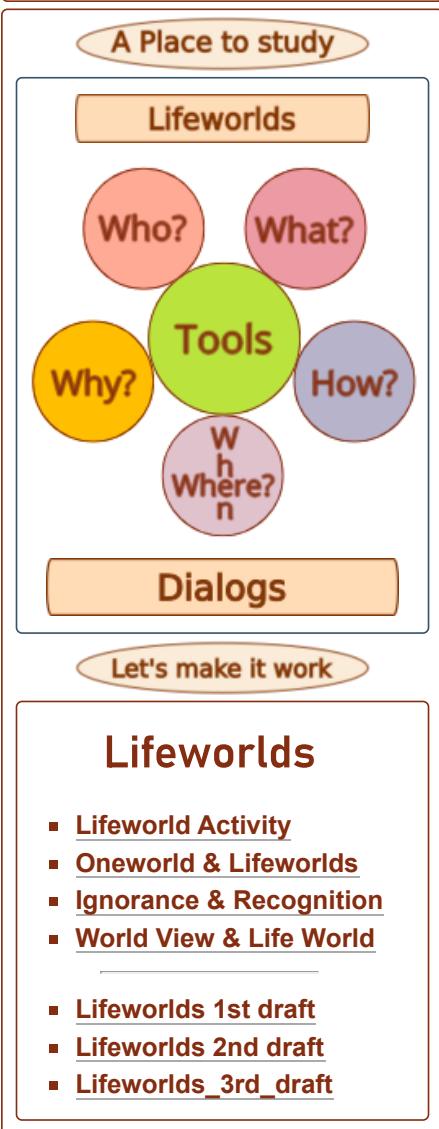
To begin, we might then ask which of our experiences, activities, and contacts qualify as *immediate*? Is sister Suzie in, but second-cousin Caroline out? That's not what *immediate* means here, but what distinction does it intended? Might it be to distinguish the lived experiencing, acting, and contacting, the existential actuality of living it all, from all the after-the-fact words and concepts that mediate our talking about those lived actualities? Ironically, understood this way, *immediate* mediates the lived experience to make it fit into the abstract definition. But then how can and should we sum all that mediated immediacy into some individual or corporate composite — *the world of a life*? How do those substantiations *make up* the world of a life?

OK. Perhaps beginning with a definition wasn't such a hot idea. Can we start in a different way? Maybe understanding a word isn't the same as knowing its formal definition. Perhaps people use particular words and constructions to nudge those hearing or reading them into understanding and reacting to what they want others to grasp. Might we think that in use, words express purposes, not definitions? What might the purpose have been for people to start using the term *lifeworld* in speech and writing? If the purpose associated with the uses of *lifeworld* was simply to convey the informational content of its definition, why wouldn't people simply say, "In the course of living a person has experiences, activities, and contacts in the world?" Why would they start this combination, *lifeworld*?

## Another question File:ToStudy.png

Hey! Don't leave us with a question we can't answer! We're not professional lexicographers.

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1st draft moved to

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# Lifeworlds

Please note: As a concept, *Lifeworlds* has great importance for the design and development of *A Place to Study*. We need to put the project in motion, however, in order to work out the modes of interaction between actual persons living and working in different lifeworlds and the resources accessible to them through *A Place to Study*. This process of emergent design may result in significant changes in the structure and function of *A Place to Study*.

*Lifeworlds* have great significance in a place to study. Lifeworlds mediate the who-what-how-where/when-and-why in studying. Let's consider the fit that lifeworlds have in a place to study carefully for it forms and shapes what can and should happen in the course of study.

Consider a statement that most every parent will have spoken when their child reaches 6 or so, "Come September Samantha begins school." This statement signals a major change in Samantha's life experience, and that of her parents, and the outward features of much of it are givens, for the school becomes not only a major feature in the lifeworld of every pupil, but a largely predictable one, for "school" signifies a well-worked out, thoroughly established program that each will follow with limited variations. A deeply distinctive feature of digital communications, a powerful affordance if we can make it work, arises with the way it provides access to cultural resources without encasing it in predetermined, given programs for their use. *A Place to Study* seeks to make this feature work.

*A Place to Study* does not itself constitute a lifeworld.<sup>[1]</sup> One does not go to it as one does to a school, college, or university. Persons will interact with *A Place to Study*, preoccupied with the flux of experience that constitutes their lives. This solves a significant educational problem and gives rise to another.

Educational institutions as we know them almost invariably offer programs of instruction that aspirants seek to follow. These programs have embedded in them lifeworld assumptions that in myriad ways can lead to disjunctions with the lifeworlds of those trying to follow the programs. Wasted talent and effort result.

1. Of course, those who devote a considerable portion of their lives and work to creating and maintaining *A Place to Study* will say that that is a big part of their lifeworlds, but that will condition and enable the uses of *A Place to Study* but not form a program for their use.

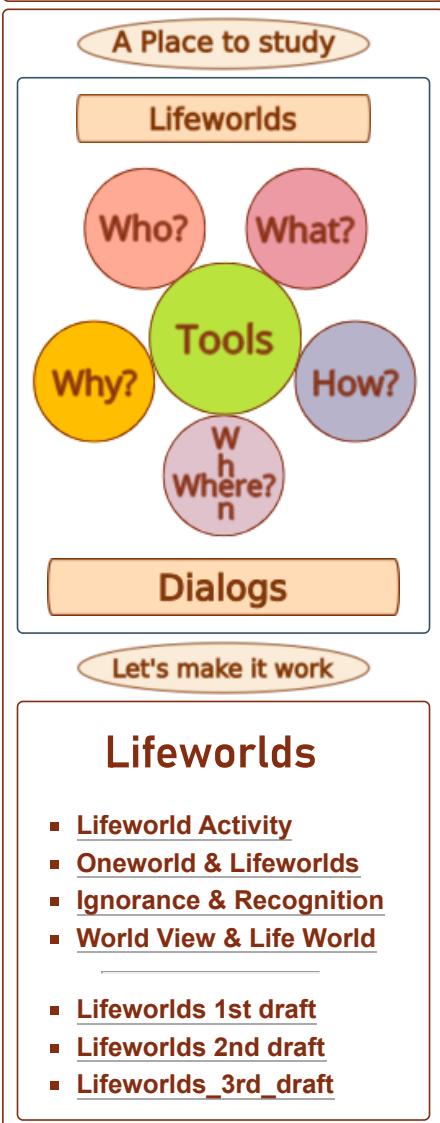
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# Who? seeks the agent at work

Here on *A Place to Study*, we ask *who?* — for instance, "Who studies here?" — not to inventory the identifying characteristics shared by members of a group, but to perceive and recognize others as persons, intentional agents, interacting with us in our experience, as a presence in some way palpable to us. . . . .

Even Presidents are persons, like all of us. Let's not forget it. We construct and use



Jacob spoke first. "I want to know if my hair is just like yours," he told Mr. Obama.... Mr. Obama replied, "Why don't you touch it and see for yourself?" He lowered his head, level with Jacob, who hesitated. "Touch it, dude!" Mr. Obama said.... "So, what do you think?" Mr. Obama asked. "Yes, it does feel the same," Jacob said.<sup>[1]</sup>

*A Place to Study* as a work of persons, for persons, and by persons. Let's think and act with persons in mind. That's not always so easy, for we live in a world populated by many roles — student, teacher, employee, manager, cashier, police officer, doctor or lawyer, pastor, sergeant, sailor, reporter, and many more, Presidents, too. Much of our education, formal and informal, teaches us to embody the various roles that circumstances thrust upon us. But our *inner-/* thinks and feels as the person that lives — not our behaviors, but our lives.

Persons live, or have lived, or will live; we have inner lives, we feel appetites and drives, we have emotions, we perceive, act, and direct ourselves as best we can, coping imperfectly with real constraints. Persons think and reason, we experience our world, we each suffer, enjoy, fear, and hope. We can understand ourselves and other persons because they and us, because we, all of us, are living or have lived, concrete personal lives.

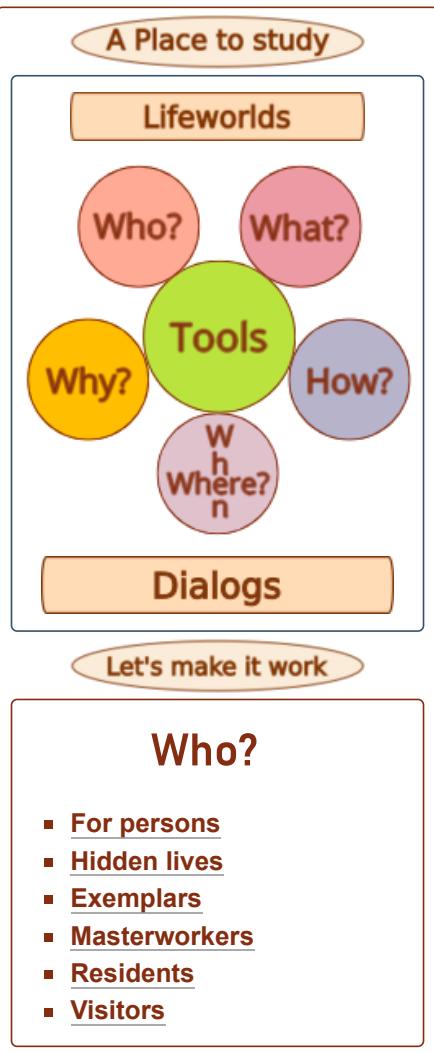
A person lives an historical, existential actuality, as an "I" that inextricably includes both her "I" and her "circumstances." I cannot abstract my life from the circumstances within which my life

takes place, within which I try to conduct it as best I can. Rarely can I do just what I please; freedom arises as we act uncertain about our abilities and the conditions we will meet through the use of them.

Let's speak infrequently about the *individual*, which best denotes an abstract construction that exists only in thought as a means to group various descriptors together. In contrast to the person, the abstract "individual" *is*; it is a conceptual doll, bearing properties, decked out in various outfits like Barbie or Ken, each named with its qualities classified and counted by careful observers, who predict how the stick figures will behave in a world of statistical abstraction, rigidly motivated by a compound causality, the parts of which aggregate to 100%.

Persons come to *A Place to Study* as persons studying, a *student* in the very simple sense of the term, a person studying. Literally, we come here studying because we come here, unsure what we come here for. This is to say that everyone interacting on *A Place to Study* does so as a *student*, a person studying, and among persons studying, there are no fixed

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We form ourselves and learn liberally by asking questions when we do not know what we are looking for. We do not answer those questions, but explore how they can clarify our intentions and sense of meaning.

hierarchies, for all are seeking to cope with their ignorance. We meet and interact as peers who interact recognizing our shared intention to clarify our respective sense of agency.

Persons studying can do a lot with *A Place to Study* simply by using their computer, tablet, or smart phone to interact with the resources here and other persons on it. That's what all of us will be doing most of the time.

To begin with, any student coming to *A Place to Study* will do so as a *visitor*, someone visiting the Place temporarily, perhaps one time only, or recurrently — occasionally or frequently, perhaps even for an intensive or prolonged stay. Visitors can go wherever they want on the Place, copy and download stuff, and interact through the *Add comment* links. Visitors can come and go as they please to partake in the purposes and activities of *A Place to Study*.

For some visitors, their time and engagement with the Place may build, and they may come to think of themselves as *residents* here. In that frame of mind, anyone can [currently, will be able to] request a free account, which will give them some additional powers of interaction, and responsibilities too, roughly equivalent to those of *editors* on Wikipedia. With those powers, they can start new pages, add resources to our collections, and work voluntarily to maintain and develop the Place and organize activities through it.

Among residents, students living and working on the Place, some will become reflexively engaged with it, a resident student whom we might identify as a *steward*, a person taking special care for the potential flourishing of *A Place to Study*. By procedures to be developed, the stewards will direct the {{cll}} and implement the consensus goals and policies that the residents at *A Place to Study* set to guide its long-term development as a place to support self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons.

## An Interlude, if you wish

But if you want to be strictly Open Source, don't click. Do 5 minutes of calisthenics, instead, or just move on as you like.

1. [Wikipedia Commons \(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:United\\_States\\_President\\_Barrack\\_Obama\\_bends\\_down\\_to\\_allow\\_the\\_son\\_of\\_a\\_White\\_House\\_staff\\_member\\_to\\_touch\\_his\\_head\\_\(cropped\).jpg\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:United_States_President_Barrack_Obama_bends_down_to_allow_the_son_of_a_White_House_staff_member_to_touch_his_head_(cropped).jpg)

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# For persons

Everyone begins on *A Place to Study* as a visitor. The place is an open city inviting you to study through it. As a visitor, you can go where you like — *A Place to Study* has no private spaces. There's a lot to take in to really know your way around. The place is a place to study in the virtual world, and the actual world doesn't offer too many places to study these days to clue us in about finding our way on our own.

A first-time visitor may see *A Place to Study* as big city without all the people, strangely deserted with nothing taking place within it. The life of a city, and of *A Place to Study*, begins to emerge as one starts doing things in it. As in a city, on *A Place to Study* visitors have a more circumscribed range of interaction than residents, but visitors can do a lot by using the means available to all, thoughtfully commenting wherever they see an *Add comment* link.

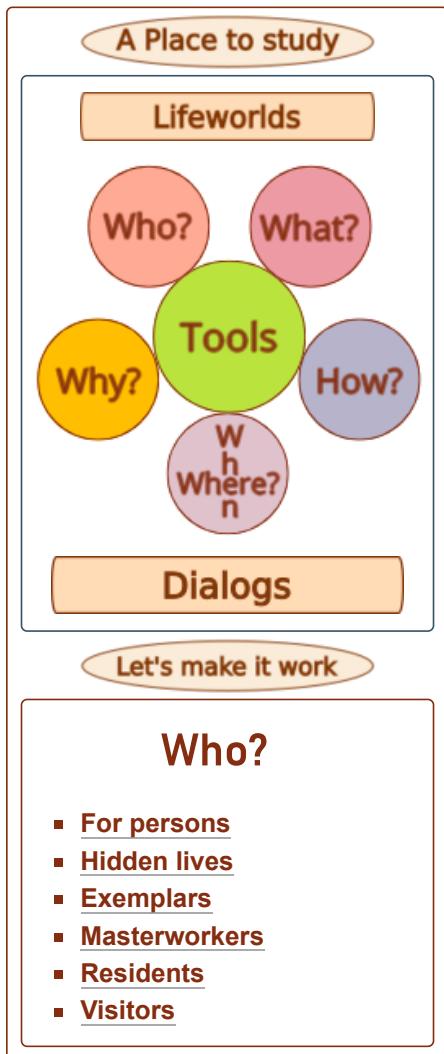
Don't be bashful. *A Place to Study* exists as a place for persons to develop and express their *thinking*, not to proclaim their ready-made opinions, choosing one from A to D, or rejoining the old Roman populace giving a thumbs up of thumbs down. Speak as you think, not as social convention suggests. Yeah, flip and plain dumb comments will quickly disappear. But thoughtful, genuine ones, expressed in the spirit of open-ended study, will last as contributions to the work of the place.

Through the activity of study, every person seeks to cope with their primal ignorance by making sense of circumstances, forming intentions, and exerting effort with the goal of realizing their possibilities in their lifeworld. Our place pages present diverse contexts for reflecting on the process and our study pages provide an occasion to initiate in word and action they aspire to fulfill. Let's take care to use our cultural resources with self-possession and an expansive spirit of cooperation.

We value questions, naïve ones and sophisticated ones. We think admitting ignorance, sharing doubts, and understanding disagreements help to spur fruitful study. We are still a long way from the condition in which everyone, everywhere has immediate access, anytime, anyplace, to the whole of human culture to support their life-long study. But the development of digital communications brings very large numbers of persons significantly closer to a reasonable approximation of it. Visitors participate in that emerging world.

In this historically unprecedented juncture, the idea that we should follow a more or less single, more or less sequential path in a life of learning makes no sense. Beginners and experts all find their own paths, crossing frequently, and wouldn't you know it — beginners in one thing are experts in another, and vice versa. Let each share their questions and share what they think. We are all ignorant; we all doubt putative certainties; and we all must live together despite countless disagreements. These are realities in the midst of which we begin each day. In the midst of that, all of us must exercise our judgment as best we can. In study, we continually use our judgment to form our judgment. The stakes in it are high, the opportunity for it at hand.

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# Hidden lives

At consequential risk, we all rely on celebrity to ease and enliven the burden of judgment. But *Fortuna* casts celebrity on the wise and the merely fashionable alike, and on others of all sorts: apparatchiks just following orders, provincial political hacks, professional athletic stars rising unpredictably from draft pools.... It brings to power accidental arbiters of truth and justice who can be dangerously arbitrary in coping with unexpected instabilities.

Whatever effects their acts of commission the rule of celebrities may bring, its greatest impact is due to omissions, which obscure, devalue and foreclose manifold possibilities of ordinary lives. These possibilities are the great tidal flats of human culture that absorb destructive forces of storms and effluents (vast would-be superfund sites...), which could nurture wondrous diversity of human achievement in bright, sunny times. **Each life matters.** Each person merits the fullest possible resources for achieving fulfillment for themselves joyously to share with others.

That is the message of George Eliot's complex novel, *Middlemarch*, an important depiction of how the middle marches — many intertwined lives, each trying, however dimly, blindly, desperately, to maintain a path towards an inchoate telos, all needing the support of their peers — family, friends, and strangers. The heroes in that great march are singularly unheroic, Dorotheas all, but heroic all the same and needful, like the great, of all possible support and facilitation. Eliot concluded with a reminder for all times:

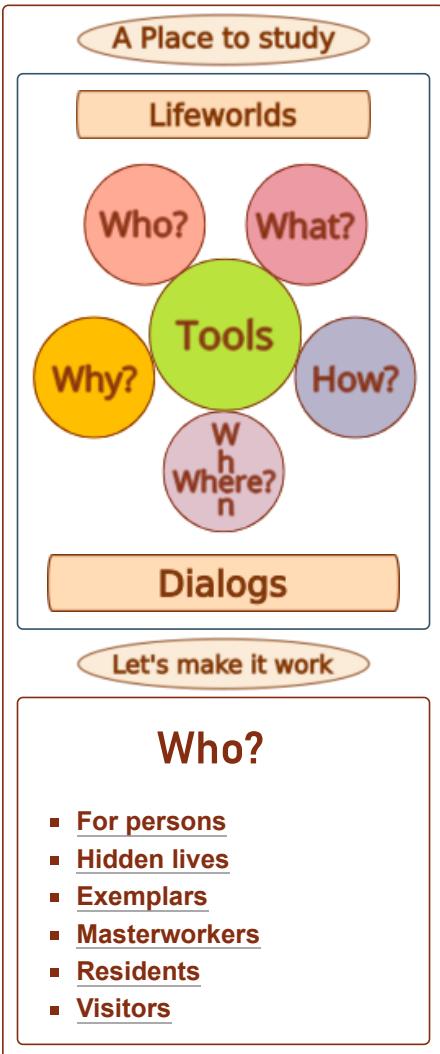
Our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature . . . spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.<sup>[1]</sup>

Bertolt Brecht wrote:

Student: "Happy the land that breeds a hero."  
Galileo: "No. Unhappy the land that needs a hero."

Let us contemplate and build upon the accomplishments of these un-honored but honorable giants whose bodies may lie in unmarked graves.

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- [George Eliot](#)
- [Middlemarch](#)
- [Bertolt Brecht quotation from \*The Life of Galileo\*, Scene 13.](#)

1. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (concluding paragraph).

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# Exemplars

[\*\* A draft to be developed. \*\*]

An *exemplar*—a person who has completed life—receives attention from other persons who are now engaged in their own self-formation. We extract from the life of the exemplar insight, understanding, and inspiration in shaping our own. An exemplar stands before us, not as an object lesson instructing us about some unattainable principle or ideal, but as a complex person of achieved significance, worthy of study, reflection, inward contemplation. Exemplars have importance, less for our public selves and our outward lives, but for the inner person who lives the life that each of us lives, generating our public selves as part of our vital presence in the world. The exemplar works, not through imitation by our public selves, but as a chosen presence with whom one inwardly communes, whose thoughts, experience, and fates one examines with curiosity, respect, and honesty in the course of framing one's own.

We, as living persons, identify others as our exemplars and project an aura of exemplarity onto them. Thus, *exemplars* indicates an open, inclusive set arising from the concrete judgments that we make, investing an exemplar's life and work with special significance for our shaping our own lives.

Through our work here, we identify predecessors we judge to be our exemplars and present their lives and work for study, relative to our concerns and predicaments. Although we all often have living exemplars, here we restrict our attention to persons who have completed their lives. That leaves us much to do, and it lessens the distortions that celebrity and notoriety can induce in the assessment of exemplarity.

Exemplarity has a lot to do with our giving ourselves positive and negative feedback in forming and carrying out aspirations. Hence we resist the temptation to see exemplars as only the good guys, the positive models. We can and should project exemplars that help us define formative possibilities that we can and should resist as well as those we can and should pursue. Judgments of exemplarity need to be nuanced and many-sided. *Novelas ejemplares* by Miguel de Cervantes helps greatly in grasping the subtleties of the concept.<sup>[1]</sup>

1. *The Exemplary Novels of Cervantes* (William K. Kelly, trans., London: George Bell & Sons, 1881),

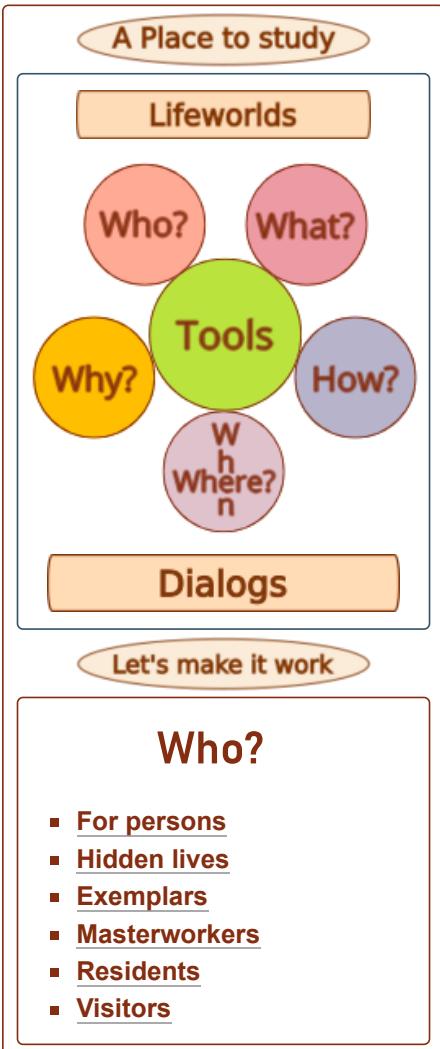
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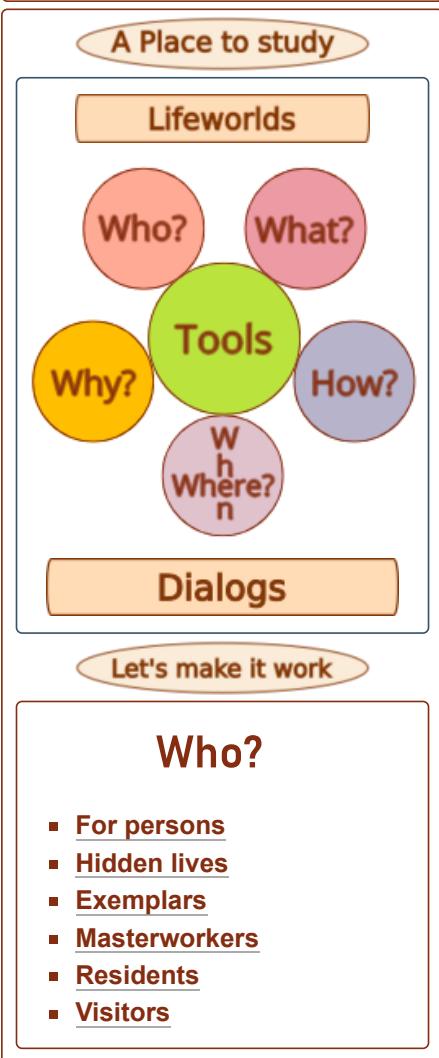
# Residents

Anyone can ask for a free account [once the site opens] and become a resident on *A Place to Study*. Although free and unencumbered, it comes with rights and responsibilities. Volunteers, that is its residents, construct and maintain *A Place to Study* and they do so by working collaboratively, among themselves and with visitors, in the spirit of the place, to form themselves and learn liberally within the digital commons they work to create. An account provides residents with tools and capabilities to add and revise resources on the place and to develop their questions, concerns, and ideas in their resident studios.

## Resident List

- [Robbie McClintock](#)
- [Vik Joshi](#)
- [Tucker Harding](#)

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# Study page: Rousseau (1712-1778)

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau, self-made originality

### File:Rousseau-Portrait-by-Allan-Ramsay.png

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778)  
Painted by Allan Ramsay in 1766 for  
David Hume

National Galleries Scotland (<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/5337/jean-jacques-rousseau-1712-1778>).

Formal education provides those whom it serves well with terrific advantages — confidence, skills, discipline, and a stock of shared knowledge. It develops bad habits too, subtle ones we easily ignore. Instruction privileges received opinion as successful pupils early learn the benefit of thinking and knowing what their teachers think and know. Didactic simplifications, which help teachers communicate and students learn, often engender a knowing superficiality in those who best benefit from their instructional opportunities. Those who manage consistently to have been deemed correct may have let their independent judgment go flaccid by rarely risking its use. And when originality in well-schooled times transgresses boundaries, the broken limits leapfrog out, co-opting the novelties into the encompassing order as memes of celebrity and dissent pluck dowager products up.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau lacked the formal advantages of his time and slowly formed himself into a remarkably original thinker. He slowly turned haphazard opportunities for self-formation into the skills and sensibility with which he could shape the culture of his time in ways that still endure within our own. A nobody for nearly 40 years, he parted the curtain of obscurity with an unexpected essay that provoked response by the leading voices of the time. For 10 years, he preserved a distinctive presence through scattered achievements as a musical composer, provoking some changes in prevailing operatic tastes and as an essayist, arousing some controversy about inequality, language, and theatrical art. Yet he withheld himself, trying to work independent of coterie and patrons at a growing cost: evoking enmity from friends.

In the 1760's, Rousseau's long course of self-formation came to a troubled fulfillment. \*\* To be continued.\*\*

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### A Place to study

#### Lifeworlds



#### Dialogs

#### Let's make it work

### Who?

- For persons
- Hidden lives
- Exemplars
- Masterworkers
- Residents
- Visitors

### Rousseau's childhood reading

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## Rousseau's childhood reading

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, Book I (Christopher Kelly, trans.):<sup>[1]</sup>

... I do not know how I learned to read; I remember only my first readings and their effect on me [at 5 or 6]. This is the time from which I date the uninterrupted consciousness of myself. My [dead] mother had left behind some Novels. My father and I began to read them after supper. At first it was only a matter of giving me practice at reading by means of amusing books; but soon our interest became so lively that we read in turn without respite, and passed the nights in this occupation. We could never stop before the end of the volume. Sometimes, hearing the morning song of the swallows, my father said, completely ashamed, "Let's go to bed; I am more of a child than you are." ...

The Novels ended with the summer of 1719 [at 7]. . . . Fortunately there were some good books in [her father's library]; and it could hardly be otherwise; since this library had been formed by a Minister, in truth, and even a learned one . . . but also a man of taste and intelligence. *The History of the Church and the Empire* by Le Sueur, the discourse of Bossuet on universal history, the illustrious men of Plutarch, the *History of Venice* by Nani, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, la Bruyère, the worlds of Fontenelle, his *Dialogues of the Dead*, and some volumes of Molière, were carried into my father's workshop, and I read them to him every day during his work. There I developed a taste that was rare and perhaps unique for that age. Above all Plutarch became my favorite reading. . . . From these interesting readings, from the discussions they occasioned between my father and myself, was formed that free and republican spirit, that indomitable and proud character, impatient with the yoke and servitude which has tormented me my whole life in situations least appropriate for giving vent to it. Ceaselessly occupied with Rome and Athens; living, so to speak, with their great men, myself born the Citizen of a Republic, and son of a father whose love of the fatherland was his strongest passion, I caught fire with it from his example; I believed myself to be Greek or Roman; I became the character whose life I read: the account of the traits of constancy and intrepidity which had struck me made my eyes sparkle and my voice strong. . . .

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* (Vol. 5, Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter Stillman, eds., Hanover:University Press of New England, 1995. pp. 7-8.

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# Visitors

Everyone begins on *A Place to Study* as a visitor. The place is an open city inviting you to study through it. As a visitor, you can go where you like — *A Place to Study* has no private spaces. There's a lot to take in to really know your way around. The place is a place to study in the virtual world, and the actual world doesn't offer too many places to study these days to clue us in about finding our way on our own.

A first-time visitor may see *A Place to Study* as big city without all the people, strangely deserted with nothing taking place within it. The life of a city, and of *A Place to Study*, begins to emerge as one starts doing things in it. As in a city, on *A Place to Study* visitors have a more circumscribed range of interaction than residents, but visitors can they can do a lot by using the means available to all, thoughtfully commenting wherever they see an *Add comment* link.

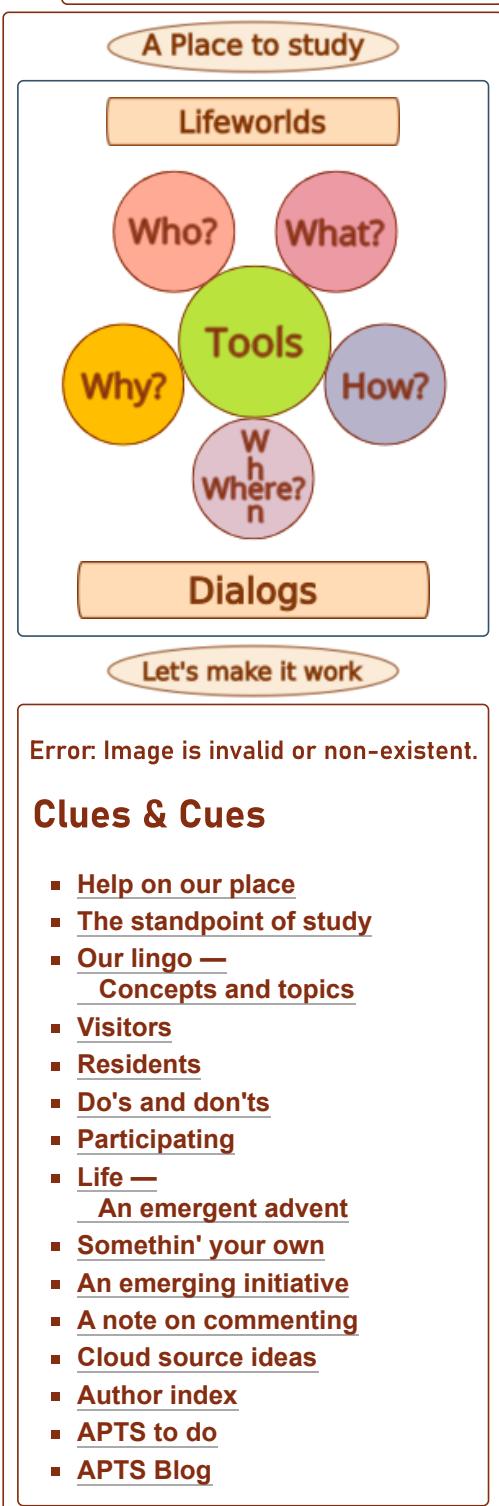
Don't be bashful. *A Place to Study* exists as a place for persons to develop and express their *thinking*, not to proclaim their ready-made opinions, choosing one from A to D, or rejoining the old Roman populace giving a thumbs up of thumbs down. Speak as you think, not as social convention suggests. Yeah, flip and plain dumb comments will quickly disappear. But thoughtful, genuine ones, expressed in the spirit of open-ended study, will last as contributions to the work of the place.

Through the activity of study, every person seeks to cope with their primal ignorance by making sense of circumstances, forming intentions, and exerting effort with the goal of realizing their possibilities in their lifeworld. Our place pages present diverse contexts for reflecting on the process and our study pages provide an occasion to initiate in word and action they aspire to fulfill. Let's take care to use our cultural resources with self-possession and an expansive spirit of cooperation.

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# What do we seek by asking *What*?

06/25: Before revising this further, it is important to substantially draft the section on Lifeworlds. Without having drafted it, judging what to deal with in this section (and others as well) will be difficult.

In asking *What?*, we seek, not a thing, we seek a concept to enhance our power to think about experience.

Let's take an instance. A small child points to a flat, black, shiny object on her mother's desk and says, "What's that?" Her mother answers, "That's my cell phone. You see me making phone calls to others with it." What was the child seeking in asking, "What's that?" Mother's answer gives the child, not the physical object, but the name of the concept that we connect in intellection, not only to mother's particular cell phone, but to a whole class of things we call "cell phones" of which mother's flat, black, shiny object is an instance.

Instead of asking, "What's that?", the child could have just grabbed her mother's cell phone, as she undoubtedly does on occasion. But in asking "What's that?", she didn't want the object, she was asking for the concept that signifies the object in thought. At that point in her thinking, the concept was little more than a name for a nearly empty concept she might associate with a peculiar pattern of mother's behavior. Interested in the activity that seems to go with the concept, she will pick the phone up and mumble into it, mimicking activity suggested by the concept, but not really getting what "making phone calls to others with it." She'll keep trying from time to time, and bit by bit she'll recognize more features, really affordances, what she needs to do in order to actualize what the concept means, which she doesn't at first grasp or understand.

In asking *What?* we are seeking concepts that we institute with meaning and import in our lifeworld, the world in and with which we intentionally interact, perceiving and effecting it purposefully. In the life course of the person, and in that of human collectivities, people come to perceive the possibility and recognize the value of constructing various intellectual worlds to perceive and act within, with vital interests abstracted away to substantial degrees. Multiple modes of abstraction build up collectively, and each person acquires a unique subset of these modes in the course of their educational formation.

These abstract worlds function as dynamic constructions within our lifeworld according to the way we abstract out our agency from them, even though we will keep that agency existentially present through the value and use we attach to the various systems of abstraction. And as we institute diverse forms of abstract thinking into our personal intellectual lives, maintaining our sense of agency becomes a continuing challenge.

Concepts, like notions, exist in thought. Even more strongly, conscious thinking takes place by means of concepts. We use them cognitively to construct and manage our lifeworld and our experience within it. By asking *What?* we are trying to expand our capacity to think consciously about what takes place in the world in which we live by mentally associating concepts to what does or might take place in experience. Thus children, on getting hold of some powerful, new concepts quickly see splendid possibilities with them, not yet having much experience of how the devil lies in the details.

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Let's note that at their root, concepts have intentional meaning. They concern, not identity, but perceiving and effecting stuff. If the mother answered, "It's a Google Pixel 4, IMEI 3567...622, she'd have given the identity but the child would shoot back, "What's a Google Pixel 4?" Adults will often answer a child's question with a simple factoid, an identifying name, say, "the moon", and the child will reply asking "What's the moon?", and the exchange can go on and on, branching out to other interrogatives as long as the adult sticks to factual responses that don't have meaning within the child's intentional world, her lifeworld. Here's a better Q&A —

C: "How far away is the moon?" . . .  
A: "Unh. I think about 240,000 miles, but that doesn't mean much does it? If you walked all day, every day until

Asking *What?* in the course of study leads us to form and grasp the power of concepts. Asking *What?* here on *A Place to Study* leads us to reflect on what concepts empower us to do in living our lives and to contemplate what enables us to recognize concepts in action from the flux of experience. As a start in building *A Place to Study*, let's concentrate on 4 ways concepts empower our living (conceptual empowerment) and 4 experiential sources from which we can extract vitally important concepts (conceptual exemplarity). These are by no means exhaustive, but broadly set a start. In this way, we anchor conceptual study, not in the various branches of knowledge, but in the challenges and opportunities of lives well lived.

- **Conceptual empowerment** — Here we consider four vital matters, four ways concepts enable overlapping modes of acting.
  - **Anticipation** conceptually postulates a goal or *telos* with reference to which we can activate and guide the capacities we need in order to seek or avoid the *telos*.
  - **Concern** defines and assesses our capabilities with reference to our goals so that we can use them optimally in the effort to actualize our anticipations.
  - **Predicament** takes account of the interlocking causalities in the circumstances bearing on our effort to use our capabilities to effect our anticipations.
  - **Possibility** recognizes and tests the limits established on anticipation in light of our concerns and our predicaments.
- **Conceptual exemplarity** — Here we concentrate on four domains of experience from which we can extract vitally important concepts.
  - **The lore of life** consists of the cultural ideas that people, around the world and across the generations, have formed in ordinary experience and pass on through it to their progeny. We mine and refine this lore, the ore of cultural thinking.
  - **Hidden lives** compose the great tidal flats of human culture, which buffer stormy forces and stream rich nutrients that nurture the wondrous diversity of human achievement in through historical life.  
**Each life matters.** Each person merits the fullest possible resources for achieving fulfillment for themselves to share joyously with others.
  - **Exemplars** result from the power each and every person possesses to feel moved by an exceptionality intimated by what appears unusual, noteworthy, in their lifeworlds. We identify and empower our exemplars, good and bad, who in and for themselves lead human lives as you or I are doing, and thus we lead our human lives with inspired self-direction.
  - **Masterworkers** rise above exemplarity to define a sphere of common endeavor through the corpus of their work and its power to evoke further aspiration, effort, nuance, meaning, and achievement by others.

you got to be older than your granddad, you'd still have a ways to go." . . .

C: "Wow! That'd be pretty hard. I wonder how those astro somethings did it?" . . .

A: "I think in a rocket, but all I know about rockets is that they can go very far, very fast, but even so it took them three days to get there." . . .

C: "Hmm. Someday, maybe, I'll figure out more about them."

**Masterworkers establish styles, shape tastes, define craft, and set norms through the capacity of their peers to recognize excellence.**

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# Anticipation

In this section, we will deal with the primary forms of human communication as we shape and use them in the course of our activities.

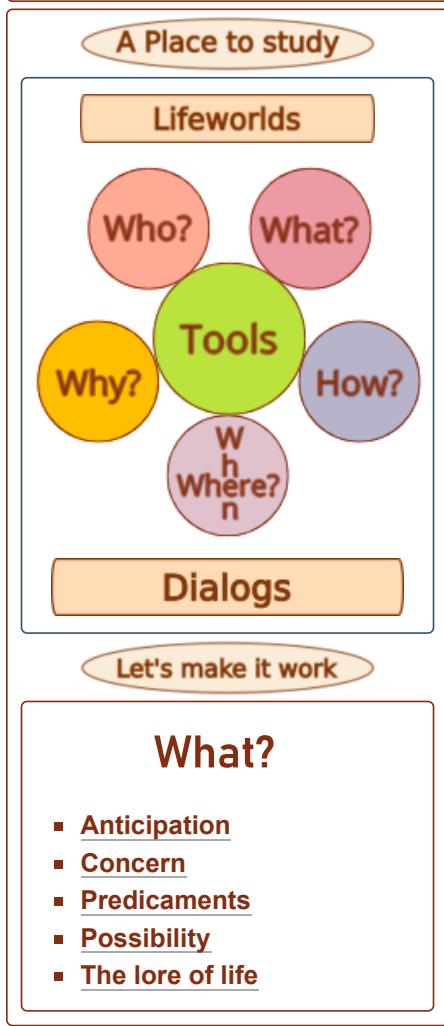
Here, let us set aside some common assumptions about the role of thinking in the course of acting. We do not think out a sequential course of action, issuing from it a set of instructions about what to do to guide the progression from start to finish. Rather we anticipate the result, which defines a hypothetical path between the origin and the destination, and then we improvise, to the best we can, and we adjust our movement, always minimizing our perceived deviation from the hypothetical path.

Consciousness does not represent to us surrounding reality so that we can fixate something in awareness and issue the sequence of instructions enabling us to affect a part of it. Rather consciousness enables us to construct, evaluate, and choose among anticipations of what we might do, and to judge and react to deviations from the paths to the anticipations we set in motion.

Systems for communicating culturally enable human consciousness to cooperate with others in anticipating what can and should take place and to correct for deviations from that path leading to their anticipations.

[\* To be clarified and continued. \*]

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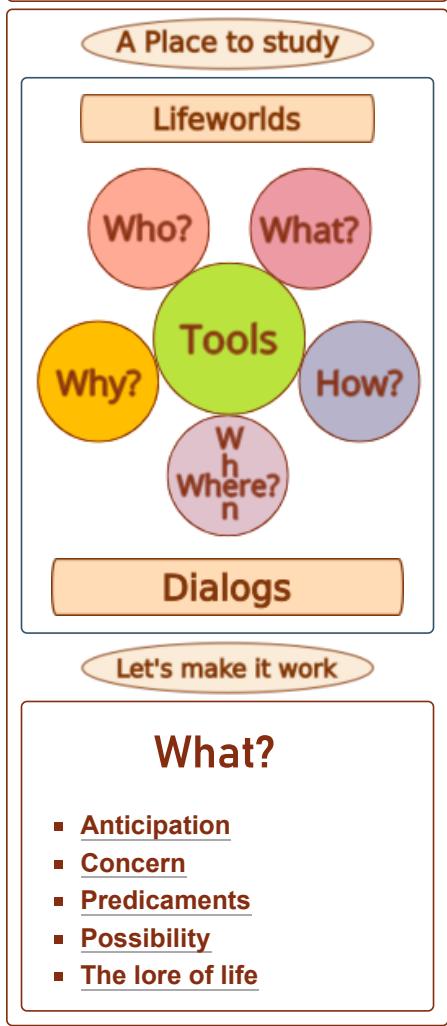
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# Concern

We often worry whether we will measure up in meeting a challenge we face. It involves an inner uncertainty whether our abilities will enable us to achieve what we feel we can and should accomplish. We look inward and feel concern, moved to attend to our capacity, to heighten and perfect it. The concern involves a moving feeling that a difficult form of acting needs to rise to a demanding standard of accomplishment. Here are eight concerns to study, for they are pervasive in our lived experience.

- Expressing meaning
- Directing desire
- Exercising autonomy
- Empowering knowledge
- Upholding values
- Overcoming alienation
- Understanding difference
- Sharing commonalities.

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# Predicaments

Persons feel a *concern* as a doubt directed inward as they contemplate acting in a multifaceted world. In contrast, persons face their outer world when they find themselves in a *predicament*. These life situations — ominous, troublesome, perplexing, perhaps even fortuitous ones — clamor for attention, a Rubik's cube of problems in which solving one aggravates another.

Everyone faces passing predicaments when we must do too many distinctly different things more or less at once. Ducking and weaving, juggling them, we manage to muddle through. But we also face more serious predicaments, life situations with many interwoven problems that interact, preventing our systematically solving the problems, one by one. These can seriously frustrate the pursuit of self-formation and liberal learning.

Usually, we think of big predicaments as something portentous, threatening — climate change, a global epidemic, poverty, war, racism. But they can be propitious, hopeful, as well. A predicament, positive or negative, involves a complex set of interlocking problems that require near simultaneous solution. The pragmatic paradigm for solving problems — problem, program, implementation — does not work well for persons facing predicaments, for the simultaneity of multiple problems put them outside the realm of practical if-then solutions.<sup>[1]</sup> Predicaments deserve study aimed at developing an alternative to the pragmatic paradigm, perhaps one we might call the principled paradigm — predicament, principle, commitment — that will help a person be mindful of the inter-relationships at work in the predicament while coping with the complex flow of their life choices. Some predicaments frustrating self-formation and liberal learning:—

- Countering the intellectual incoherence of culture.
- Becoming inclusive in judgments and actions.
- Freeing learning from social, professional, and academic biases.
- Bridling opportunism by fostering integrity.
- Learning to act globally by thinking locally.

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1. The method of elimination used in mathematics — simplifying the problem systematically by removing variables one by one — leads to atrocity and genocide, and all sorts of extreme injustice when the predicament involves diverse human problems.

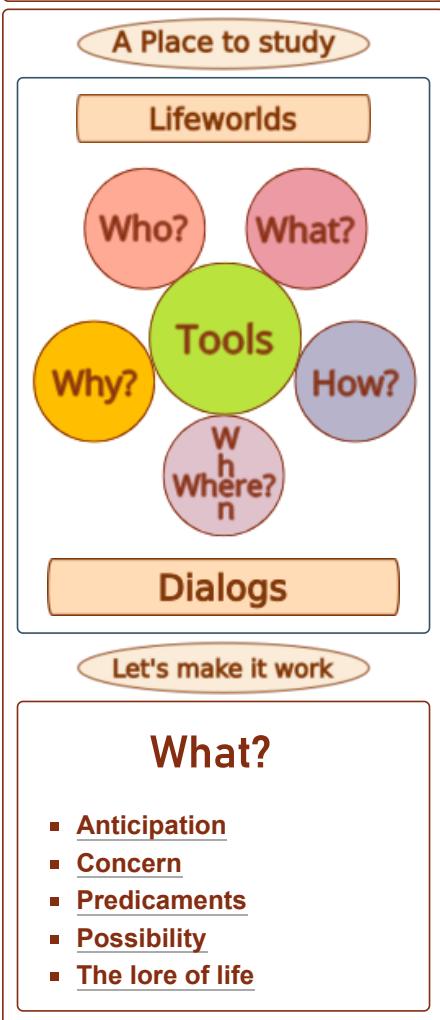
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# Possibility, not prediction

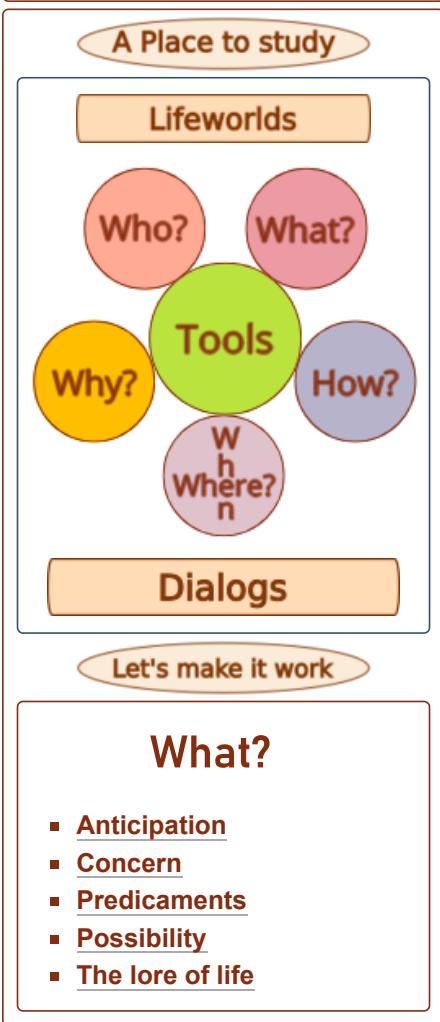
In the vast complexity of life, historical experience—what takes place—emerges from the innumerable interactions among living beings that all strive to maintain themselves through their relentless reciprocal interaction. Each lives in a world facing indeterminacies, experiencing their determination with inexorable unpredictability in the unfolding present. Each day's news is *new*, however hackneyed it might seem, another increment of actuality, precipitated out from the indefinite potentialities the future bears within it.

Whether at the personal or the public level, in the historic world actualities take place, emerging from the flux of complexity. People arrogantly structure education instrumentally through a set of predictions about probable situations. But education does not causally produce effects, either in the lives of students or in the sociopolitical landscape they inhabit. We try to do so imprudently. No sagacious body can predict what children in the millions will each want to know forty years hence. In late modern pedagogy, prediction has a dangerous, inflated role in educational effort. It nurtures a monoculture, rigid within normality, brittle when hit by the sudden onset of unexpected conditions.

Historical possibility involves the unpredictable. It begins with the capacity of each person to shape in some degree the substantial particulars of her own life. The possible and the predictable differ and stand in significant tension with one another, especially in the dynamics of living. Would-be educators — parents, teachers, adults, public leaders — far too often exaggerate the educative value of predictions and overlooked the pedagogic power of possibility. Indeed, far too often they discount possibility, understanding it merely as a highly uncertain prediction.

Prediction kills self-formation and liberal learning .....

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# The lore of life

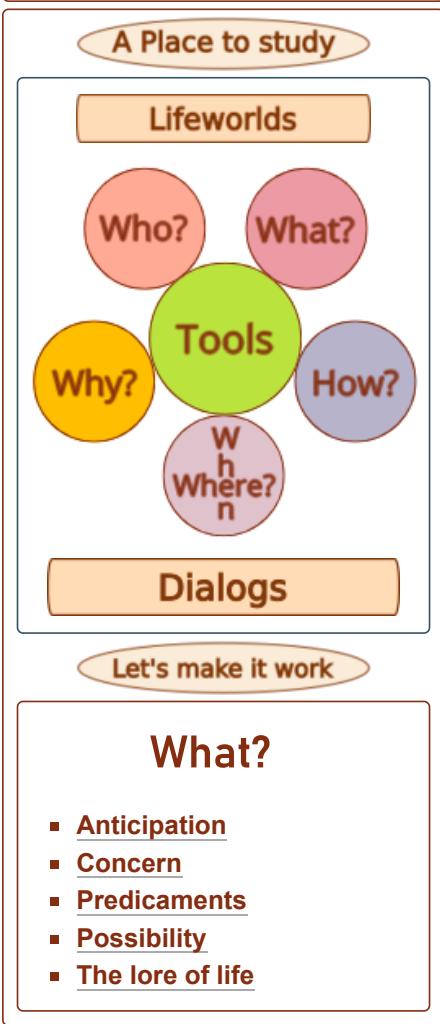
Everyone, from time immemorial, engages creatively in forming themselves and learning liberally. We recount stories and relate myths. We sing, dance, and make music. We tell jokes and sketch caricatures. Under pressure we fearfully scapegoat, anathematize, and warn of dark conspiracies. We celebrate—holidays, festivals, carnival. We memorialize the stages of life—birth, coming of age, death. Some of these in knowing ages may have a transactional overlay, but in *arche* and *telos*, origin and aim, these deeply human, spontaneously participatory, formative activities we do for their own sake.

We can and should pay close attention to all these on *A Place to Study*, not primarily in an antiquarian spirit, collecting and compiling the variants of them. Rather we need to attend to these as the foundation, the primordial ground of human self-formation and liberal learning, a cultural growth surging up in the human commons, fraught with spontaneous intentionality through which people shape themselves autonomously.

People find all this lore of life highly fulfilling, and at first it flourishes historically in relative isolation. But quickly its fecundity overgrows the isolation and the close juxtaposition of spontaneous traditions occasions friction and conflict, providing the setting for more disciplined forms of intentionality, which draw much of their vigor from their examination of their more spontaneous roots in life. Thus Plato called the poets to account, something we continue in our turn, not to suppress them, as crude readings of Plato suggest, but to examine our spontaneous intentions through them to understand how to modulate their conflicts and to coordinate them meaningfully as we pursue our proper purposes.

- Make this paragraph clearer and then expand the items in the list as a lead-in to the pages for each.\*\*

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# How? joins thinking and acting

(To be revised)

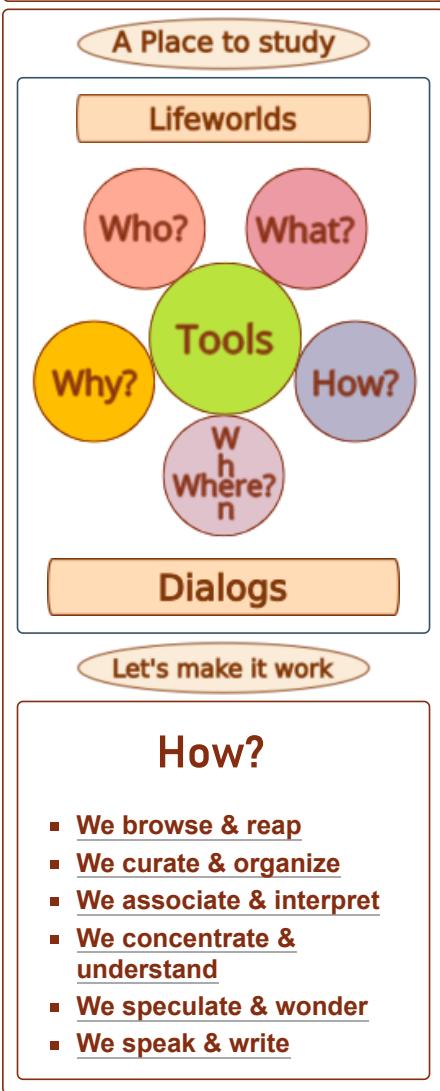
- **What?** leads to the universe of concepts, nouns;
- **How?** describes the working of action, verbs.

In this district, we start with the question, *How do we study?* That leads us to consider a range of activities important in the work of study to which we locate with links to the right. What's unusual about them? In most instructional situations, the question *How?* merges with *What?* and we get a topical listing, lots of courses, subjects, indicating *what students can study*.

On *A Place to Study* we don't want our inquiry programmed for us in this way. There's lots and lots of resources here from which each can and should extract concepts, topics for study. But we don't study in a monochromatic manner, teeth clenched and eyes squinched, in response to some imperative, "Study this!" In its fullness, we study in a highly variegated manner, many different modes of acting, which with reflection we can mix and match to control our movement towards a dynamic purpose. What's key is not piling up a mound of topics, but keeping the sense of purpose dynamic, imbuing life with a continuous sense of purpose.

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# We browse & we reap

OK, ask it—why say we browse in discussing how we study? Isn't browsing sort of casual; studying really serious. According to Google, to browse means to "survey goods for sale in a leisurely and casual way" and to study means to "devote time and attention to acquiring knowledge on (an academic subject), especially by means of books," and somewhat more generally to "look at closely in order to observe or read."

Google gives us good, ordinary usage, meanings conditioned by current, everyday life. We might wonder why Google thinks that browsing primarily involves goods for sale, but let's skip over that and note how it links study to acquiring knowledge on academic subjects through books. Indeed, most of us encounter study as something that happened, or should have happened but maybe didn't, in our schooling. Even when we did it well, study in schools often seems heavy, a bit oppressive, a chore, something we did because we had to do it, something some times, even often, we wouldn't do because having to do it made little sense to us, relative to other possibilities. Why does the ordinary meaning of study have all these implications?

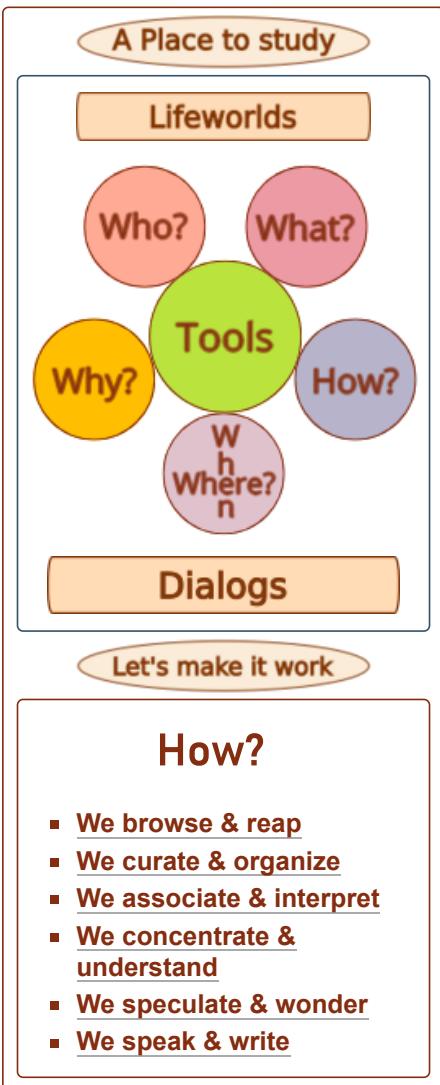
Think back. Those academic subjects, how did we encounter them? Through our lessons, our assignments, the textbook; prepare this Monday, that Tuesday, the quiz will follow. That's how we, billions of persons, have encountered what it means to study. Let's ask whether that encounter has something unusual, incomplete or limiting in it. In the rest of life, many will continue having to study in much the same way whenever our boss requires a full report tomorrow on whatever his boss requires of him. School sometimes does prepare for the prevailing modes of work. Is that the sum of possibility?

On occasion, a person will get interested in studying something, not prompted by some assignment, but drawn to it out of curiosity, interest, taking it up freely, for its own sake. If we compare that to the typical form of study in schooling, we see that the latter short-circuits much in the process of study. When directed by assignments, study becomes predictable, constrained, orderly, and testable. Our schooling habituates us to bypass the foreplay of study, to limit its passion, to mandate and modulate our engagement in it, to convert it into fungible units that publicly aggregate into an education or career.

In the fullness of life, a person does not spontaneously know to devote time and attention to studying this or that, especially through books. In the fullness of life, one commits time, and directs attention, and acquires books and other cultural resources, through extensive activities that constitute integral parts of a place to study in our lives. It encompasses browsing in a leisurely and casual way, surveying not merely goods for sale, but the possibilities of life. Study, examining life lived for its own sake, starts with browsing -- with surfing the waters of the world, learning to judge the swell, to catch the wave. In real life, lived well, browsing, feeling at ease, slowly getting serious about this or that and having a sense of what comes next: all is essential to good studying.

And the person who browses will find it preparing her to reap. In browsing, we attend lightly to many things, registering possibilities. Rarely do we see a full and fix purpose at first sight. Purpose emerges as we perceive nuances and stake out what's sustainable among alternative paths. All that, browsing makes possible and as purpose firms our prior scoping out the field of possibility then enables us to make choices directing our attention with conviction and verity. Having browsed well, we we reap richly.

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# We curate & organize

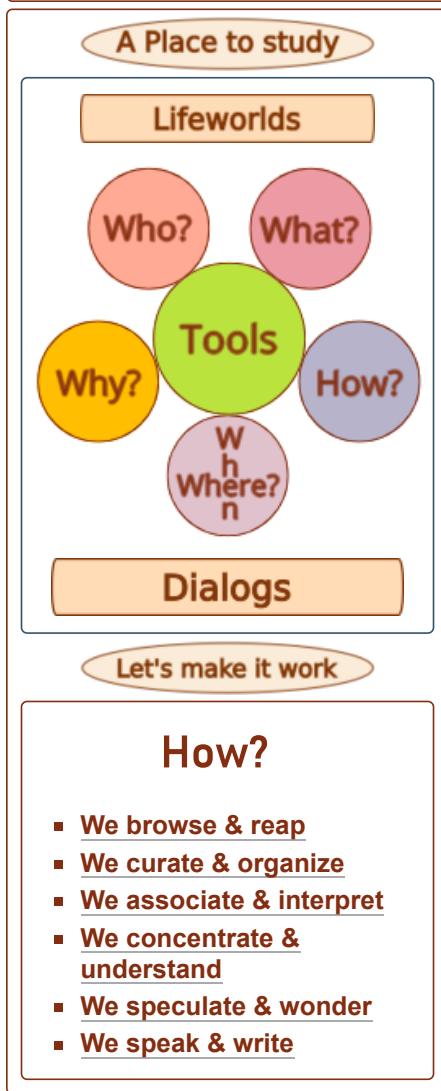
If reaping gathers and preps cultural resources for effective use, curating assesses and presents those resources to their potential users, promoting discrimination and efficiency in their use.

Curating creates a stream of commentary by diverse persons—others, yet like ourselves—to inform, orient, and inspire how we engage with our culture. Good curating should not tell others what to think about a work, nor merely impart information to them about the work. Rather it should help others situate the work in a context meaningful to them so that they can decide how they want to engage with the work and experience it firmly and fully.

On *A Place to Study* we seek to promote engagement with the resources of our cultures in and through the digital commons. To do so well, we need to think clearly about how engaging cultural resources takes place in the context of the digital commons. The challenges there may differ significantly from those encountered historically in contexts where material objects embody the cultural resources.

Let's leave moot, for now at least, the question whether people can more productively create cultural resources by using material or digital tools -- in both cases the human will and mind may be the constant limiting factor. Once a work has been created, it gains its cultural power and significance as others reproduce, store, transmit, retrieve, apply it in shaping their lives. The capacities and limitations of these functions in the material marketplace and the digital commons differ radically, at the root, which creates profound problems for understanding how to curate cultural resources in the digital commons. How can and should we curate cultural resources to promote their fulfilling use through the digital commons? On *A Place to Study*, we should make that question a central concern.

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# We associate

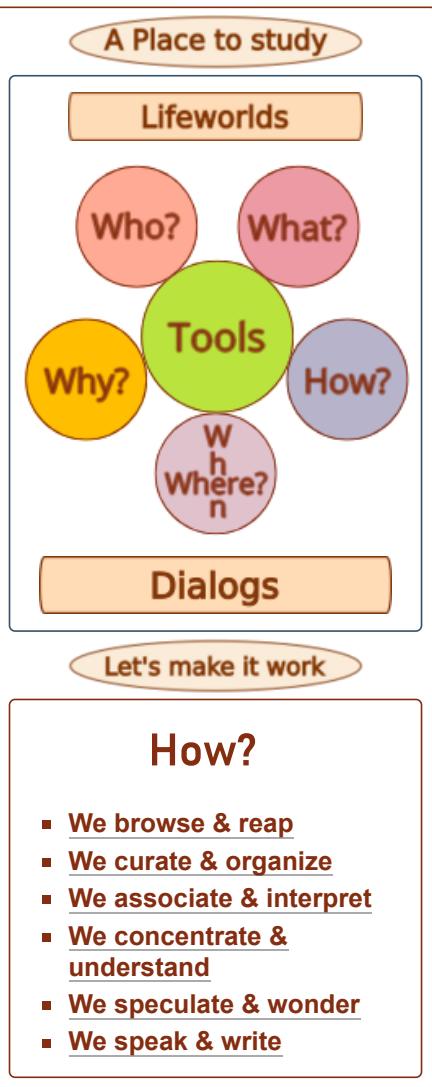
In much of life, we habitually project boundaries onto the world and our lives in it and stuff objects and our experience with them into these containers. Similarities and identities then become what matters. These take on various auras of valence and significance. It all serves as an economical way to respond to the complexities of experience. Economical, but not necessarily conducive to clear thinking and judging.

Actually cognition relies on extensive networks of interconnected nodes with the connections for many rather sparse and for some quite concentrated. Cognitive researchers have made some progress in describing the operation of these networks at the cellular level, but the means of observation do not penetrate with sufficient precision and dynamism to inventory operations at the molecular and atomic levels to chart what, if anything, is taking place there. Where do these observations leave us?

I think it is fair to say that associative think emerges in the processes of study in a productive, meaningful sense. Yet, we do not, and cannot within the foreseeable future, initiate or control that emergence predictably. Instead we need to hold ourselves in active readiness to note and follow up its emergence. For this purpose, we do well to attend closely to wise observers stating conviction fully aware of its uncertainty—what they believe, via reflection or intuition, must be the case despite the grounds for it being beyond the scope of what they recognize as securely knowable. Life is ripe with evident matters that must be, or have been, or will be, despite our inability to know them. It is neither irrational nor unwarranted to take them into account, cautiously as best we can.

- -- to be concluded soon. . . .

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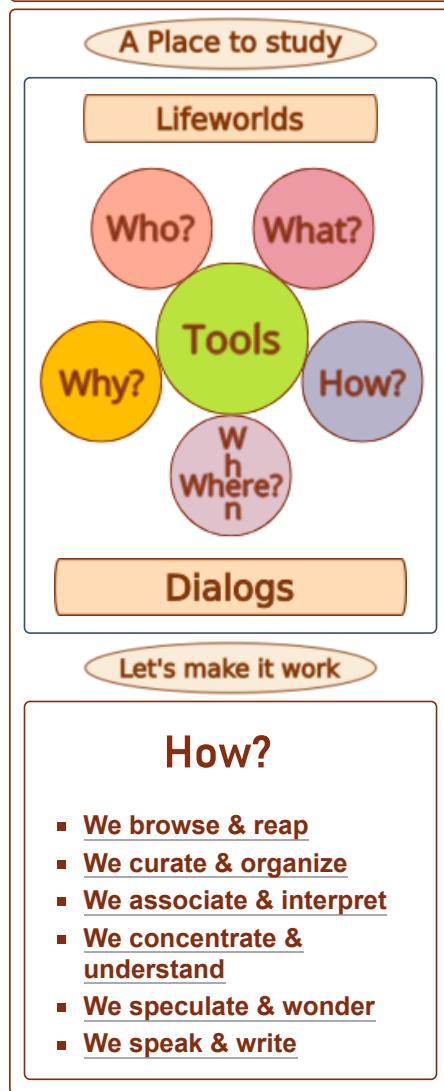
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# We concentrate

When I contemplate the digital commons, I see a pullulating growth of initiatives, many commercial, many institutional, many governmental, and some autonomous, growing for their own sake. The situation creates a great clamor for attention. We take a first step in developing our ability to concentrate by ignoring all that.

As an unenclosed initiative in the digital commons, *A Place to Study* has no need to grow a user base rapidly

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# Where? situates lived experience

(To be revised)

Actually, *Where?* includes *When?* and *When?* includes *Where?* Combined, they situate lived experience, what was, is, or will be taking place. Verbs of actualizing — to *happen*, to *take place*, to *become*, and all their synonyms — have greater significance for thinking and acting than the verbs of being — to *be* — however overused we may find verbs of *being* in current speech. To say that *X is Y* establishes nothing substantive; it merely recognizes an identity between a conceptual subject and a conceptual object. To express *where and when* taking place, we situate it in lived experience, the stuff of life.

As a lived experience, study starts as we sense our ignorance or incapacity, as we wonder about some mystery, or as we intuit some possibility, and study emerges as we apply intelligent effort to what might assuage, satisfy, or realize the condition we experience. As complex humans, we experience much to occasion our study, many situations to engage us in it, many resources to sustain and further it. If occasions for study pervade our lived experience, why should we build a special place for it? If each person can and should study for themselves, why should we concentrate attention on it here, our own attention and that of anyone else who might become interested? What takes place *here*, where and when we visit or reside in *A Place to Study*, beyond the possibilities that arise in any here and now in which study might occur?

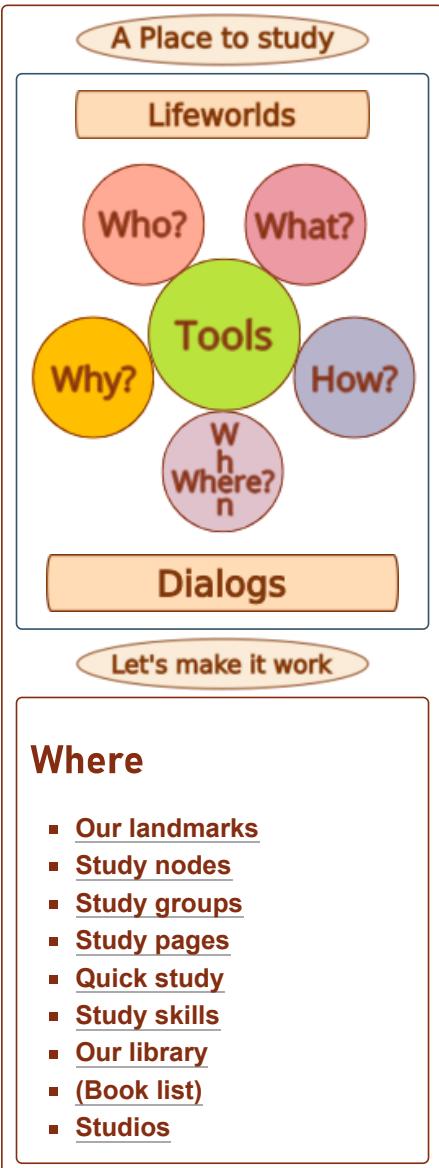
To answer these questions, observe how, for many generations, people the world around have established special places within the school of life where instruction can take place through the concentrated practice of teaching. A place of instruction is a place where the art of teaching takes place. What is it that connects to study, as teaching connects to instruction? Let's respond:

## **To incite stands to study, as to teach stands to instruction.**

On a place to study, we incite study, we urge or spur it on; we stir it up, we animate, instigate, stimulate it. A place to study is a place where we abet, arouse, encourage, excite, exhort, foment, goad, induce, inflame, inspire, motivate, prompt, provoke, rouse, spur, and urge ourselves and others as active agents of study. It behooves us to design the situations — where and when — to incite all this activity and effort to take place with care, commitment, and art.

- [Study nodes](#) — This page will be added soon.
- [Study groups](#) — A group will incite the self-formation and liberal learning of its members by supporting their distinctive, personal efforts as each expresses her own ideas and aspirations, tries to transcend her habitual routines, and develops her chosen possibilities.
- [Study pages](#) — Like the traveler's guide book, study pages inform a student's choice, particularly the initial choices to attend first to this and not to that..
- [Study skills](#) — Study requires intellectual skills, the roots of culture — speech, reading, writing, symbol and sign. Like well-used scythes, these need recurrent honing.

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- **Quick study** — We construct lived experience with a diversity of timescales, and a lively mind will find food for thought in short bits — a quick observation, a powerful aphorism, a passing example, or some words of wit.
- **Our library** — A Place to Study is not a library, but we have one, starting small and imbalanced, to which we add materials, believing they may have special value to those seeking self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons, eventually approximating a collection adequate to our purposes. Our [current list](#).
- **Studios** — Each resident on *A Place to Study* has a personal work area to support their study, self-formation, and liberal learning. These work areas are important components of *A Place to Study* as a whole, spaces in which residents can develop and present their views about what they are doing and why they are doing it.

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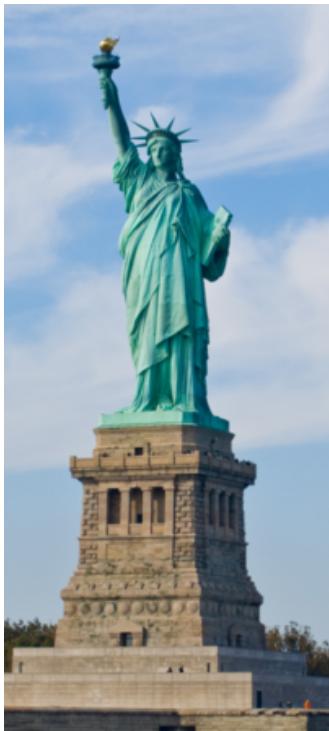
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# Our landmarks

To get around *A Place to Study* well, imagine an actual place, one that's large and complex, like the city we love, one with a populace dedicated to the free growth of mind. We live, we think and act, in a world comprising actualities, near and far. We can recognize the digital commons as an emerging *virtual* actuality within the world in which we live, understanding *virtual* in its root Latin meaning, "with functional

excellence or power." People catch on to programs in the virtual world, their world of functional excellence or power, when they see something mimic usefully the way things work in their physical world.

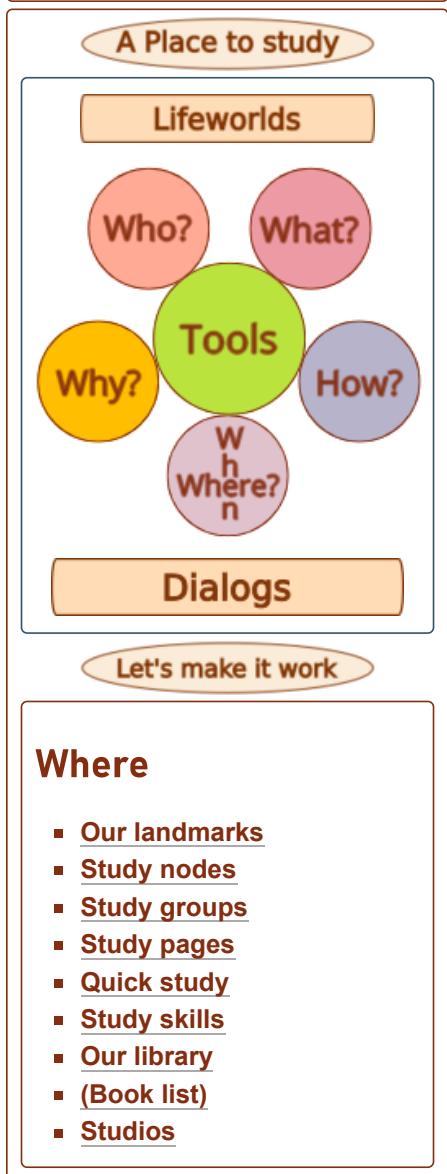


"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she / With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"<sup>[1]</sup>

developed for Wikipedia and its sister projects. And indeed, at times searching by keyword on *A Place to Study* will work, for visitors can access much on it in that way. But *A Place to Study* does not serve primarily as a means of retrieving information about a range of named topics. With *A Place to Study* we need to ask consciously, what serves as a real-world analog to it, to a place where persons can work with cultural resources in extended, open-ended efforts to advance their self-formation and liberal learning?

We might liken it to a university, which is similar in the scope of cultural resources and the depth with which people engage with them. But *A Place to Study* does not have the functional features characterizing universities — no formal programs

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leading to degrees, no admissions requirements, neither "the faculty" nor "the student body." The websites of colleges and universities all look and work more or less alike and they do not look and work at all like *A Place to Study*. What then?

We can leave that question open, as we do with many questions here. However, we loosely take the city, urban life, as the analog to the material world that helps organize *A Place to Study*. An old medieval phrase — "*Stadtluft macht frei nach Jahr und Tag*," city air makes one free after a year and a day" — suggests two things about *A Place to Study*. First that a prolonged engagement our urban way of study may have something to do with our actualizing our autonomy,<sup>[2]</sup> and second, that it won't happen overnight. Let's now step out of the past towards the future: globalization spreads *Stadtluft*, city air, everywhere as cities 'round the world look and work alike and as digital communications ensnare everyone, everywhere, in reliance on urban resources to conduct themselves in an urban style of life.

1. Concluding lines from "[The New Colossus](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus) (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>)" by Emma Lazarus, inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.
2. The medieval phrase referred to customary law, according to which a serf from the countryside who managed to live for a year and a day as a free person in a free city, one independent of the prevailing feudal regimes, would be considered free of any prior obligations as a serf. Let's hypothesize that behind the legal formality there was a formative aspect: the lord of the manor knew that recovering a serf who had grown accustomed to autonomous life in the city would no longer be suitably servile and more trouble than his labor would be worth.

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# Study groups

We start with a proposal for a study group on Michel de Montaigne as an initial write-up of an effort to prototype a study group on *A Place to Study*. As we gain experience with such prototypes, we will draft a general discussion about forming our study groups.

Montaigne study group 01/17/2022 to 03/21/2022.

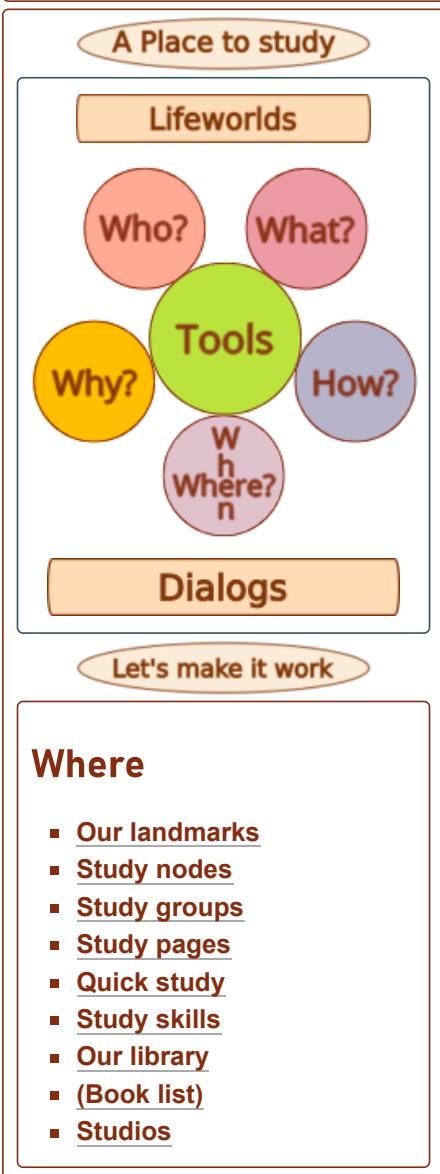
Study groups occur often in instructional settings. There powerful incentives drive them, significant examples arise as we engage in studying for the test. *The Paper Chase*, an excellent film, depicted the power and pathologies of such study groups well. On *A Place to Study* we have the task of redesigning study groups as a context for spurring study without relying on external motivators.

Let's begin by noting how powerfully the external motivators determine how we perceive what a study group does, how it works, and what to expect in one. External motivators do not simply explain why students form one; they determine what the students forming one seek to do through it, how they organize it, and what they do in it. The motivators move us to do much more than prepare for this or that exam, mere visible bits of a great frozen mass beneath. It's Harvard Law, and all the other meritocratic contexts. They mark everyone, some as those who made it, the rest as those who did not. With luck and hard work, we all run through sequential competitions, each test compounding prior consequences, each working to categorize and sort the further, prospective tracks, better and worse ones, which lead, with further luck and more hard work, to expectations about power and wealth — deficiencies for many, for some limited, some sufficient, and for those marked most able, immense. These pressures have been in effect from childhood, almost universally, for many generations. Might they be a croc?

To categorize, sort, and rank, the meritocratic systems of instruction group aspirants, require them to master a difficult mass of conventional materials, and measure their relative performance on peremptory exams driven by weighty incentives. By suspending incentives on *A Place to Study*, the *raison d'être* for all that disappears. What possibilities can then emerge? Let's imagine what happens, in our hopes, at least, with a small dinner party, 6 or 8 friends in conversation, diverse in experience, interested broadly in intersecting concerns, relaxed, both boss and mother-in-law not among the present company. At once attentive and spontaneous, everyone interacts, drawing on their diversity and commonality of experience and interest. One asks a provocative question, another tells a memorable story, someone flirts, another kids about it, the youngest asks for some advice, which sets off a volley of conflicting suggestions. The participants experience different feelings, think different thoughts, but share a satisfying pleasure, until — How late! — the guests depart with a sense of completion, fulfilling and meaningful. It's conviviality — the art of living together.

Of course, most dinner parties don't live up to that ideal, and further, a dowdy study group, even on *A Place to Study*, won't have the ease and insouciance of that ideal. But for the study group here, the absence of external incentives break the constraints on the participants' agency. Each can be more authentic, spontaneous, trusting, inquiring, reflective — actually, there's nothing to lose. Members of a study group should avoid atavism. Each can and should rely on their own agency and respect and support the agency of the other members. Let's configure the group to create the space where the personal agency of its members will flourish. For that, the object of study defining the group should be expansive and fuzzy — not, for instance, "the theme of death in Montaigne's essays," but rather "the life and work

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of Montaigne and the universe of its significance for us." Such a topic — let's call it a "quasi general topic" — creates a broad ground of shared inquiry that will require each to construe it meaningfully for herself.

Our topic — *The life and work of Montaigne and the universe of its significance for us* — might enable diverse persons to find reasons to join in its study, but it will not be adequate, in and of itself, to define the particular, personal concern on which any one of them will concentrate. As the first contribution to the study group, each participant can and should introduce themselves to the other members, making their personal interest in the topic clear and beginning to focus that interest into an initial interests of study. Let's face it. Many of us, perhaps almost all of us, find it difficult to open up in this way in most settings, especially educational settings. Let's suck it up and get over it.

From early on, in home, in school, in work, most everywhere, we find ourselves subject to countless assessment regimes. These engender a deep spirit of distrust. Guardedness becomes engrained, a façade for every situation. We learn to work in little enclosures, hidden spaces. We can overcome all that. In actuality, each and every one gets born thoroughly ignorant, and damn stupid, too. In that, we are all peers. Let's take it from there. Culture, the actuality of what humans make of ourselves, is a commons, achievements of, for, and by all. We share and nurture that by being open about what we can and want to do. What draws us to study, in this instance, the life and work of Montaigne and the universe of its significance for us? That's the question that constitutes the study group, the question that each tries to answer recursively over time in interactions with the other members of the group.

This recursive mode of interaction over the life of the study group sets it apart from the test driven model, which drives towards a given telos, acing the test — map it out, spill it back, and move on. Let's call our groups *recursive study groups*, for they should nurture recursive development along distinctive paths occasioned by congenial feedback to one or more instantiations of the studying each member pursues. At this stage, we have minuscule experience with recursive groups on a place to study. Consequently, organization of preliminary trials rests largely on intuitions about how they might work informed by a sense of possibility based on experience with group study in instructional settings.

Let's start out with a small group, say 4 participants, reasonably heterogeneous in background and interests. Let's start with a short, initial period in which the participants introduce themselves to each other and rapidly survey Montaigne's life and work, each thinking about their own self-formation and liberal learning and significance that Montaigne might have for that. Let's try culminating this start with a short statement of intent, extending and deepening the initial reflections, to which the other participants should briefly respond in a sympathetic spirit. Then let's do two cycles in which each participant pursues their agenda of study

## "to construe it meaningfully"

Let's keep in mind how easy it has become to say things that we do not construe meaningfully. Let's avoid constructions that simply signify forms of public allegiance, devoid of personally considered meaning.

Mon 01/17:	Montaigne study group convenes; MSG participants introduce their interests, backgrounds, and goals.
Tue 01/18 thru Thu 01/20:	Each MSG participant plans an initial study agenda through an intensive orientation in the universe of Montaigne.
Fri 01/21:	MSG participants present their initial study agendas.
Fri 01/21 thru Mon 01/24:	Each MSG participant responds sympathetically to the other participants' initial agendas.
Mon 01/24 thru Thu 02/10:	MSG participants study according to their revised agendas, adapting them according to their best judgment.
Fri 02/11:	Each MSG participant posts her reflections on her work and her ideas and their rationale for extending it.
Fri 02/11 thru Mon 02/14:	Each MSG participant responds sympathetically and posts it to the self-assessments by the other participants.
Mon 02/14 thru Thu 03/10:	MSG participants study according to their further agendas, developing ideas for their contributions to a <u>study page</u> on Montaigne.
Fri 03/11:	MSG participants present a summation of their work on Montaigne and their initial ideas for a study page on him.
Sat 03/12 thru Mon 03/21	MSG participants complete and post a personal account of their study and a group work to complete and post a study page for Montaigne.

## A note on sources

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The best translation is a well-read one, and you have four reasonable choices. If you want a print edition, you have two fine choices: *The complete works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters* by Michel de Montaigne (Donald M. Frame, trans., Everyman Library, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) and *The complete essays* by Michel de Montaigne (M. A. Scheech, trans., New York: Penguin Books, 1993). If you already have one or the other, good — use it well. If you are going to buy one, in my opinion, the hardback Everyman edition of Donald Frame's translation, currently at \$28.49 on Amazon, is slightly the better buy than the Penguin paperback of Screech's translation at \$24.99. Both are fine, contemporary translations, but commentators generally use Frame as the standard in references and its quality of book production is higher.

You can get complete editions of Montaigne's *Essays* online for free in the widely used translation of Charles Cotton (1685), edited by William Carew Hazlitt (1877) in Our library and in Project Gutenberg and elsewhere. Cotton and then Cotton Hazlitt have been deeply embedded historically in commentary on Montaigne in English, and this translation is well-worth study. Additionally, you can find online an older translation of the *Essays* by John Florio (<https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/766/montaigne.pdf?sequence=1>) in the *Renascence Editions* at the University of Oregon.

Our purpose is to study with Montaigne as our interlocutor and for this we can largely bypass the secondary literature. You may want a little orientation, however. For that purpose, you will find that the article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy by Marc Foglia, substantively revised by Emiliano Ferrari, gives an

excellent overview and appreciation of Montaigne's cultural significance. Even more, in 1941, Stefan Zweig wrote a short survey of Montaigne's experience and achievements, *Montaigne* (London: Pushkin Press, 2015), to celebrate the importance of his humanistic sensibility for Western culture at a time of immanent danger to it. And there's been lots and lots written about Montaigne, and now we can say that the newest is the best: *Montaigne: A Life* by the French authority, Philippe Desan, originally published in French in 2014 and quickly translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

## A note on reading

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Our agendas of study will draw from these and other resources, but the actual substance of the study each of us undertakes draws on all our life experience as that motivates and constrains our reading, reflection, and writing. In contemporary intellectual life, we suffer from a viscous circle between reading and writing, short-circuiting its ground in our experience. Scholars, journalists, and literary figures generate a vast over-production of writing. We speed through it; we all read far too superficially, grabbing this meme and that buzzword much too quickly, without integrating it into our inner lifeworld. Instead it becomes an "approach," something short of a coherent set of ideas, and eagerly we turn the approach into vacuous grist for the writerly mills. And back and forth, it gets worse and worse. Can we break the cycle?

Let's try here to occasion slower, more thoughtful reading with a tighter relation between writer and reader. In studying, we do not need to cover a set syllabus. . . .

Many of us have been schooled to avoid first-person expressions in our writing. Disemboweled discourse seems so much more objective! But in studying we pursue a first-person endeavor, thinking consciously and with our deeper powers. And to actualize our efforts, we communicate what we have to say to ourselves and others. That's how study becomes shared reciprocally, a fully human activity of persons interacting with one another. To pretend the *I* and the *we* are not involved dehumanizes thinking into objective knowledge, impersonal thought stripped of its thinkers.

Montaigne's charm, his power, his presence after 450 years, arises from his mastery of the first-person essay. The very term, essay — an attempt, an assay, a testing — entails the active agent as its author. Let's write that way in responding to Montaigne and to each other.

But, we wonder. Can we make just what "that way" means more vividly clear? We easily use the first-person, singular or plural. We can talk about attempts — "Yesterday, I tried a new way home from work and got into bad traffic," but that doesn't hack it. It is not the fact of having gotten into bad traffic, but what we think and feel and want to do in reflection on our experience of bad traffic that we write about to communicate to others.

"Bad traffic" may be a bit more mundane than most of the things that occasioned Montaigne's reflections. But Montaigne anchored his reflections with facts of common experience, and he communicated to readers what he felt and thought in reflection on them and what he learned about himself in reflecting on those reflections. To join him, to enter into the cycles of reflection, we need to consider facts of experience in our lives analogous to those that triggered Montaigne's writing.

Biographically, Montaigne wrote the bulk of his essays between 1570 and 1580, starting at the age of 38. Prior to that, he had been an up-and-coming politico in the city of Bordeaux and the surrounding areas, hotspots of life-threatening interaction between French Protestants and Catholics, a high-stakes, transactional situation.

Montaigne withdrew to read, reflect, and write in his study, the top-floor of a squat tower adjacent to the Château de Montaigne, seat of a small seigneurie acquired by Montaigne's great-grand-father, some 60 kilometers from Bordeaux.

### Montaigne's tower

....

Jacques Barzun on *conversation*

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## Previous Study groups

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- Study group 1 — 4 readings, 4 participants, interacting for 4 weeks  
(7/19/2021 - 8/15/2021).

- Proposal • Agenda • Commentary

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# Study pages

Critics obsessed with [Milton's] great reputation and great scholarship tend to look exclusively to literary sources for his ideas. . . . My not very daring suggestion is that Milton got his ideas not only from books but also by talking to his contemporaries.<sup>[1]</sup>

We use *study pages* to help us inform and orient our diverse inquiries. Neither lessons nor assignments, study pages somewhat resemble good travel guides, ones that strengthen their users' agency in doing what they intend to do. Both travel guides and study guides help users make discerning choices for themselves. They provide information about what's where and notices about why people generally go to see this or that, what importance they have attached to it historically, esthetically, or in some register of fun and adventure. Like the traveler's guide book, study pages inform a student's choice, particularly the initial choices to attend first to this and not to that.

As we begin, study pages on *A Place to Study* are sparse and short for the simple reason that volunteers create *A Place to Study* and only a few have been doing so for a short time. We trust that the number and scope of study pages will increase, but they should remain in character *study pages*, neither syllabi nor packaged tours. On *A Place to Study* let's hold dear that quip, oft attributed to Cervantes, "the road is better than the inn." Study pages serve persons who are finding their own way, deciding on what roads they will take and making sense of their experiences along the way.

In working with study pages, we should develop guidelines that clearly differentiate them from encyclopedia entries. The two forms overlap to some degree, but the encyclopedia addresses the current state of knowledge about the materials it covers whereas the study page informs the choices a student will likely encounter in advancing self-formation and liberal learning by self-directed engagement with the topic. The two forms differ because each serves a different intent, to know something through the encyclopedia and to do something through the study pages. The latter intent seems vague because we have much less experience with it than we do with the intent of acquiring knowledge about something through an encyclopedia.

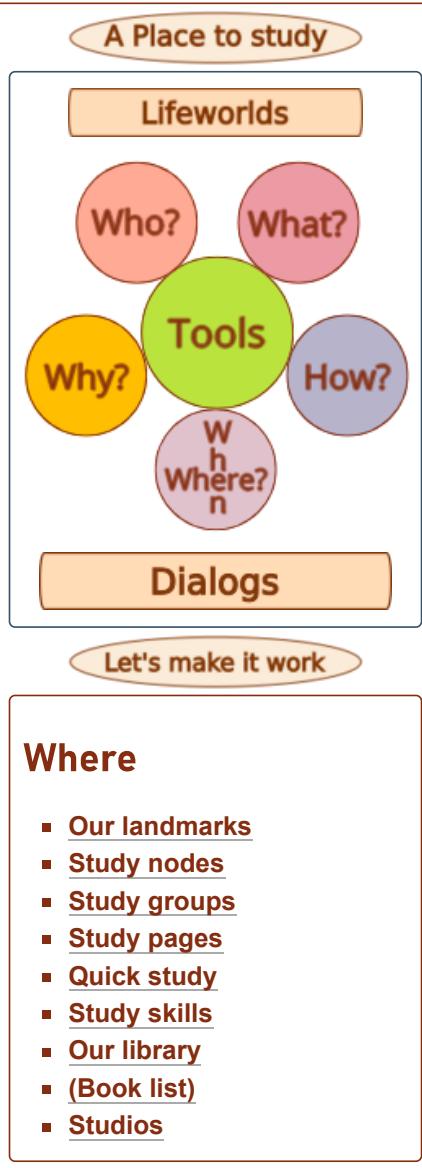
Let's start drafting and using study pages, developing our understanding of what will make them effective by continually reflecting on our experience with them. To start, we can group them under various headings such as persons, events, concepts, places, periods, and so on. What are we doing when we contemplate a work, achievement, or example of another in a self-formative way? What happens when we read or watch or hear something moving or meaningful when we do it freely, without ulterior purpose, autonomously? How can we support such experiences taking place?

Let's hypothesize that throughout historical time and across cultures many creative persons wanted to communicate to other persons through the work they crafted things that each had found meaningful in their self-formation and liberal learning. For instance, perhaps Michel de Montaigne did not write his essay, "De l'institution des enfans," to propound

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## Study Pages

- \* Persons
- \* Events
- \* Concepts
- \* Places
- \* Periods



It is not wise to think that we can't; but avoiding that thought leaves us a long ways from

his pedagogical principles as they might be applied in educational praxis, but rather to communicate to Madame Diane de Foix, Contesse de Gutson, and others like her, the range of what would come to his mind when he thought freely and considered self-formation in the context *de l'institution des enfans*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Let's try during summer 2021 [now winter 2022] to organize a small working group to *study* Montaigne's essay as if he wrote it with this intent, taking all the matters to which he refers, not as digressive ornament, but as integral to the cumulative substance of what he wanted to bring to mind.

**understanding that we can. We study to traverse that distance.**

1. Christopher Hill. *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977) p. 5.

2. I leave Montaigne's title of the essay in his French to suggest that we might open up its potential meanings as part of our hypothesis. He could have written *de l'éducation*, or *de l'instruction*, or *de l'enseignement*, but chose *de l'institution*, which now primarily means an institution or establishment, but certainly in the 16th century and on into the 19th, it meant not only the organization (e.g. the Royal Institution of Great Britain), but the process of establishing or instituting something. Let's study Montaigne's essay, *De l'institution des enfans*”, as if it is an essay about the process by which children form, and let's do so as part of our instituting *A Place to Study*.

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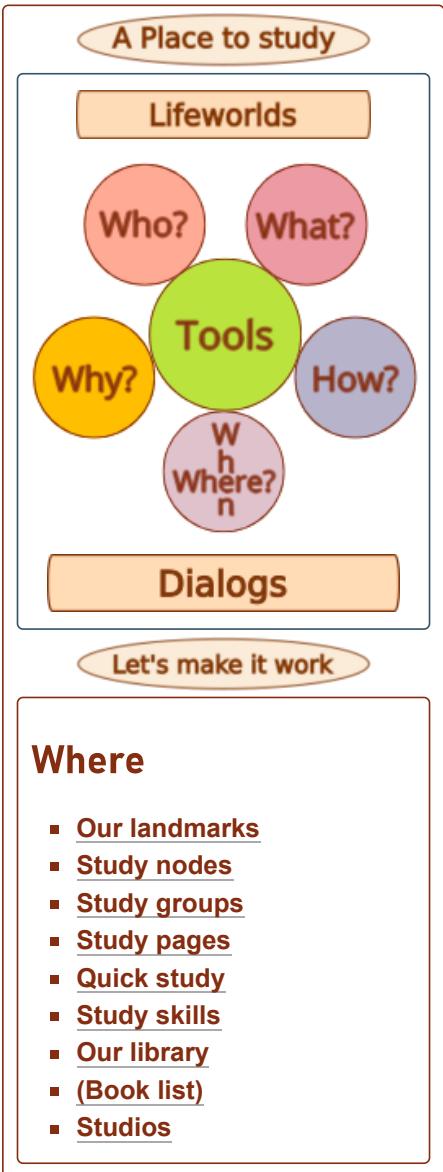
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# Quick thoughts

Yes, we take things seriously. But time's short. Here's some quick thoughts to grab on the run. What's your response?

- [Quotations to ponder](#)
- [Goethe said....](#)
- [Maxims from Montaigne's study](#)

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# Study skills

Let's concentrate on the basics, the study skills that each and all have acquired. We can speak. We read and write. We use our senses, especially seeing and hearing, to perceive what's around us. Why should we stop now to study these? We've used them to come this far. Why not keep at matters where we're more thoroughly ignorant?

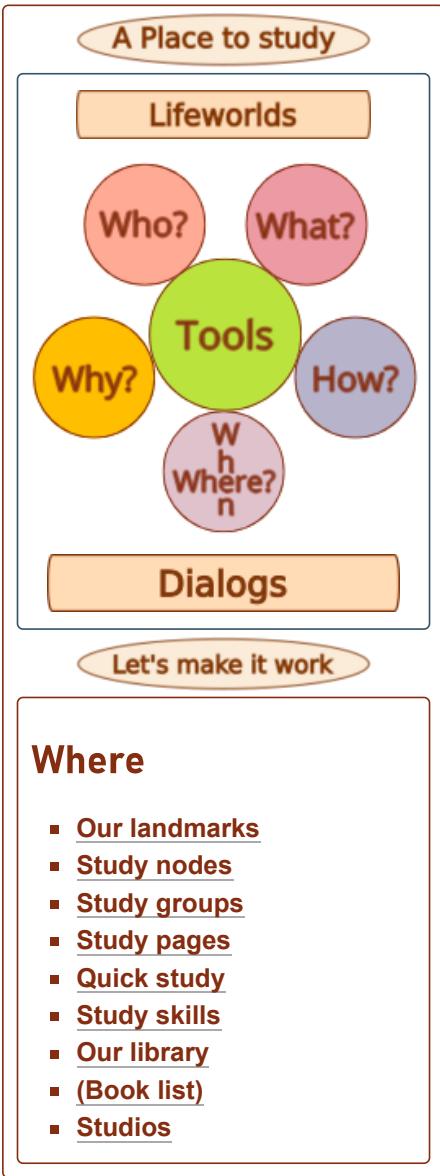
Life takes place 24/7. We are not born with an empty slate, so many blank spaces that we then fill in one by one with this or that — "Here's some empty time! I'll put study into it." That's a prescription for an *if-only* sense of life. We don't *have time for* something, or even *find time for* it; we *take time to do* something, and in taking time to study something we are basically taking time to improve doing it through recursive repetition. Let's study this proposition.

By taking time to do something, we mean bringing fuller attention to bear upon it, in this case attending to who, what, how, where—when, and why we are doing something in order to improve our doing it recursively. A degree of familiarity with what we are doing does not stand as a reason against studying it, but rather it serves as a necessary condition for studying it. That's why we have to say, to begin, begin. Our basic skills enabling our cultural activity are prime matters for study because we are using them throughout our lives and they provide ubiquitous opportunities for recursive repetition.

*A Place to Study* offers opportunities to apply our powers of judgment to our basic cultural skills. People often worry whether what they or someone else is saying is ethical or moral, asking whether it measures up to some abstract standard. Often we would do better to ask ourselves whether we would feel it appropriate, sound, or just to say it to any and all persons rather than to some special subset of people.

...

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## Where

- [Our landmarks](#)
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- [Study groups](#)
- [Study pages](#)
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# Our library

*A Place to Study* is not a library, but we have one. It contains many of the resources with which we study. Currently it holds a sparse, initial collection as part of developing our prototype. It lacks lots that should be there, includes perhaps some things that should not be there, and what's there tilts perilously towards the work of dead, white, Western males. And further, we've been acquiring resources for the library in textual media faster than audio and visual media. With time, we will right these imbalances, less by getting rid of what's over weighted, but by building up what's underweight. All that is as it is: the caterpillar does not look like the butterfly.

We follow our principle: To begin, BEGIN. We start adding materials to our library, believing they may have special value to those seeking self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons. As we do that, we start to manifest our ignorance. Does what we have included really have that special value? What further resources, which may have that value, should we include? With these further beginnings, we reiterate the questions, and by proceeding to develop our library, we do not settle those question, we renew and deepen them through our new additions and subtractions to the collection, furthering its beginnings.

Thus study is always beginning in ignorance; its resources always growing in incompleteness. Acknowledging that infinite regress, students — residents and stewards — have a special responsibility in maintaining and developing *A Place to Study*.

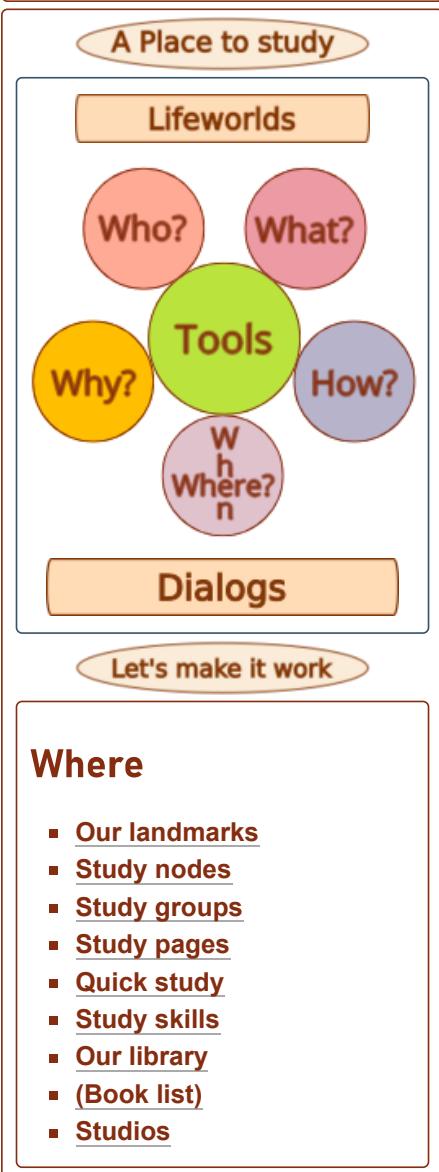
We don't fully transcend ignorance or reach completion, hence it's long been said, the road is better than the inn.

We cannot simply outgrow our biases. We need to cope with our ignorance and to set potential criteria for inclusion and exclusion for a library supporting self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons.

In summing how he had sought to study culture and communication, Richard Hoggart enunciated some basic rights, which can serve us well building our library — a commitment to *"the right of each of us to speak about how we see life, the world; and so the right to have access to the means by which that capacity to speak may be gained. The right, also, to try to reach out and speak to others, not to have that impulse inhibited by social barriers..., the right of wider access to higher education,... for wider access also to the arts as the most scrupulous explorations we can make of our personalities and relationships, and of the nature of our societies, and, as a support to all this, the best uses of mass communications."*<sup>41</sup>

Now some will say, "Wait! Don't we all have those rights? Look at social media 2.0. Nearly everyone is using it. Its affordances give us the capacity to speak about life and the world, to reach out and speak to others. We enjoy greatly widened access to higher education and to the arts in all their forms, and to voluble talk of cultural, social, and political events, all through unparalleled systems of communication that Hoggart did not live long enough to witness." As a statement of the current situation, this assertion may seem factually true, speaking very generally, but it does not establish that this situation indicates the limits of our capabilities in the digital commons.

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1. Richard Hoggart, *An imagined life: Life and Times, 1959-1991* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 26.

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# Library listings

As our library listings grow, this page will morph to remain useful.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
H	I	J	K	L	M	N
O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
V	W	X	Y	Z		

## Our library — by author

### A

- Henry Adams (1838-1918) • [StudyPage/Henry Adams](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres \(1904\)](#)
  - [The Education of Henry Adams \(1907, 1918\)](#)
- Aesop (c. 620–564 BCE) • [StudyPage/Aesop's Fables](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Aesop's fables \(1912\)](#)
- Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) • [StudyPage/Matthew Arnold](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Culture and anarchy \(1869\)](#)

### B

- Bible • [StudyPage/Bible](#) • [Wikipedia](#) • [Wikipedia on King\\_James\\_Version](#)
  - [King James version of the Bible](#)

### C

- Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) • [StudyPage/Carlyle](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [About: Thomas Carlyle \(1904\)](#)

### D

### E

- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) • [StudyPage/Emerson](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Essays, first series \(1841\)](#)
  - [Essays, second series \(1844\)](#)
  - [Nature \(1849\)](#)
  - [Representative men: seven lectures \(1850\)](#)

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### A Place to study



### Dialogs

### Let's make it work

### Where

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- [Study pages](#)
- [Quick study](#)
- [Study skills](#)
- [Our library](#)
- [\(Book list\)](#)
- [Studios](#)

- [The conduct of life \(1871\)](#)

## F

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## G

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- [Mahatma Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#) • [StudyPage/Mahatma Gandhi](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [About: Mahatma Gandhi \(1924\)](#)
- [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe \(1749-1832\)](#) • [StudyPage/Goethe](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [The Sorrows of Young Werther \(1774\)](#)
  - [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship \(1796\)](#)
  - [Maxims and reflections \(1833\)](#)

## H

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## I

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## J

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## K

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## L

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- [François de La Rochefoucauld \(1613-1680\)](#) • [StudyPage/La Rochefoucauld](#)
  - [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Reflections, Or, Sentences and Moral Maxims](#)
- [John Locke \(1632-1704\)](#) • [StudyPage/Locke](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Of the conduct of the Understanding \(1706\)](#)

## M

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- [Michel de Montaigne \(1533-1592\)](#) • [StudyPage/Montaigne](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Essays of Michel de Montaigne \(1580, 1877\)](#)
    - [Preface & Life](#) • [Book one](#) • [Book two](#) • [Book three](#)

- About: Montaigne the essayist 1858

N

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O

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P

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- Plato (429?–347BC) • StudyPage/Plato • Wikipedia • SEP - Plato (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>)

- [Apology](#)
- [Crito](#)
- [Euthyphro](#)
- [Charmides](#)
- [Laches, or courage](#)
- [Euthydemus](#)
- [Protagoras • SEP - Plato's Shorter Ethical Works](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics-shorter/>)
- [Cratylus • SEP - Plato's Cratylus](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-cratylus/>)
- [Symposium • SEP - Plato on Friendship and Eros](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-friendship/>)
- [Ion • SEP - Plato's Aesthetics](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-aesthetics/>)
- [Gorgias](#)
- [Phaedrus • SEP - Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-rhetoric/>)
- [Meno](#)
- [Phaedo • SEP - Plato's Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-metaphysics/>)
- [Lysis](#)
- [The Republic • SEP-The Republic](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics-politics/>)
- [Critias](#)
- [Timaeus • SEP - Plato's Myths](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-myths/>)
- [Menexenus](#)
- [Parmenides • SEP - Plato's Parmenides](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-parmenides/>)
- [Theaetetus • SEP - Plato on Knowledge in the Theaetetus](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-theaetetus/>)

- [Sophist](#)
- [Statesman](#) • [SEP - Method and Metaphysics in Plato's \*Sophist\* and \*Statesman\*](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-sophstate/>)
- [Philebus](#)
- [Laws](#) • [SEP - Laws](#) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-utopia/>)
- **Plutarch (46-119)** • [StudyPage/Plutarch](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Lives, vol1](#)
  - [Lives, vol2](#)
  - [Lives, vol3](#)
  - [Lives, vol4](#)
  - [Morals](#)
- **Thomas Platter**
  - [Autobiography](#)

## **Q**

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## **R**

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- **François Rabelais (1483-1553)** • [StudyPage/François Rabelais](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Five Books of the Lives, Heroic Deeds and Sayings of Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel, translated by Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty and Peter Antony Motteux \(1653 & 1708\)](#)  
[Introduction](#) • [Book 1](#) • [Book 2](#) • [Book 3](#) • [Book 4](#) • [Book 5](#)
- **Romain Rolland (1866-1944)** • [StudyPage/Romain Rolland](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Mahatma Gandhi \(1924\)](#)
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)** • [StudyPage/Rousseau](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Emile, or On Education \(1762\)](#)
  - [Emile, ou de l'éducation \(1762\)](#)
- **John Ruskin (1819-1900)** • [StudyPage/Ruskin](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Unto this last, and other essays \(1862\)](#)

## **S**

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- **William Shakespeare (1564-1616)** • [StudyPage/Shakespeare](#) • [Wikipedia](#)

- [The complete works of Shakespeare \(1623\)](#)

T

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U

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V

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W

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- [Mary Wollstonecraft \(1759-1797\)](#) • [StudyPage/Wollstonecraft](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [Vindication of the rights of woman \(1792\)](#)
- [Virginia Woolf \(1882-1941\)](#) • [StudyPage/Virginia Woolf](#) • [Wikipedia](#)
  - [The common reader \(1925\)](#)

X

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Y

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Z

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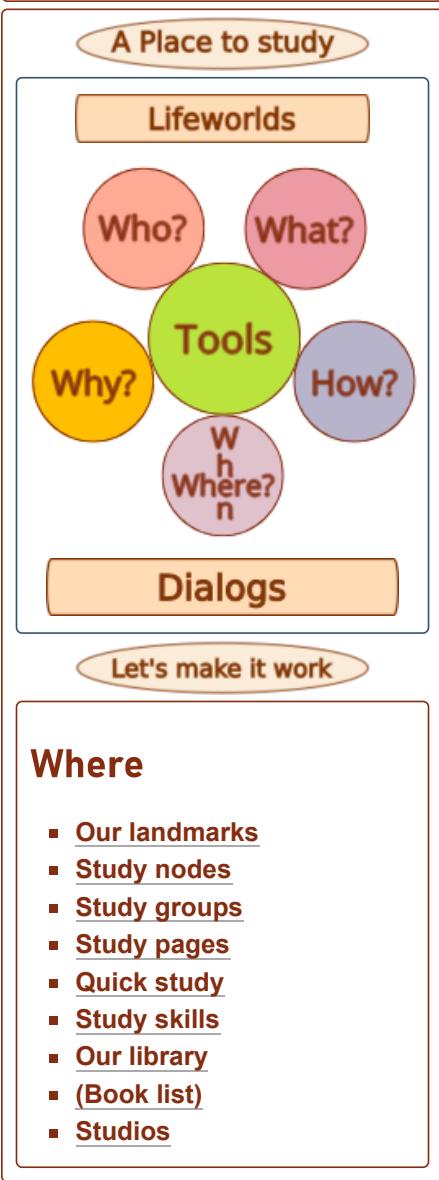
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# Studios

On *A Place to Study* we participate, not in the website, not in an organization or corporate enterprise. We participate, as in a sport, in a widely shared activity—that of forming human selves, instances of humanity. This is not a zero-sum game. We play, not to win, but to participate, to take part as fully as we can—that is the life each leads. Each does so contingently, for life itself comes to each of us, as a gift. Nevertheless, we participate definitively, for each lives a cumulative set of irrevocable actions for ourselves and for others. We live our lives squeezing inchoate possibility through the constraints of here and now into the receding expanse of lived experience. *A Place to Study* exists as possibility, one which we can try to bring to life by striving to actualize what it can and should become—a real resource freely available to all as they pursue self-directed activities in the human commons, the wonderful diversity of human lives.

In the shared activity of forming human lives, participating through *A Place to Study* is contingent and incidental, one possibility among many others. To call *A Place to Study* a possibility recognizes that it is not yet an actuality. As a possibility one participates in it by striving to instantiate the idea. Hence, participating in *A Place to Study* at this point involves trying to instantiate it by acting *in loco parentis* towards it, concentrating on actions that will actualize the possibility as a reality available to all. We can do that by being careful to create initial content for the site that will effectively illustrate the purposes and spirit of it. That willingness to participate from the beginning in ways consistent with the purposes and spirit of the effort is key to self-directed activities in the human commons.

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# Why? directs and motivates effort

(To be revised)

Asking why we study engages us in thinking, but we too easily short-circuit the thinking asking why in the form of *Why bother?*, why should we take the trouble to study when we feel so busy, so pressed by many cares, just wanting some relaxation, escape, a "good time."

*Why bother?* preempts *asking why*. It pretends that we don't do these activities and maybe we'll start if we can find a good reason to do so. But in actuality, we began studying long ago. In the course of living our lives, we have been all along forming ourselves, learning liberally, and disclosing the commons. The question is not when to start, but to become more aware why we do these things we've been doing all along. Throughout our work on *A Place to Study*, let's pay attention to why we do study, sharpening our sense of purpose as we form ourselves, learn liberally and disclose the commons.

We find it difficult to attend to our purposes in studying because they are activities deeply embedded in our lives. They are not a great new idea for which we need a grab-you elevator pitch. They emerge from our infantile beginnings, from our primal ignorance, from our solitary vulnerability. Let's take a moment to contemplate initial conditions to see how they stick with us as key motivators throughout our lives.

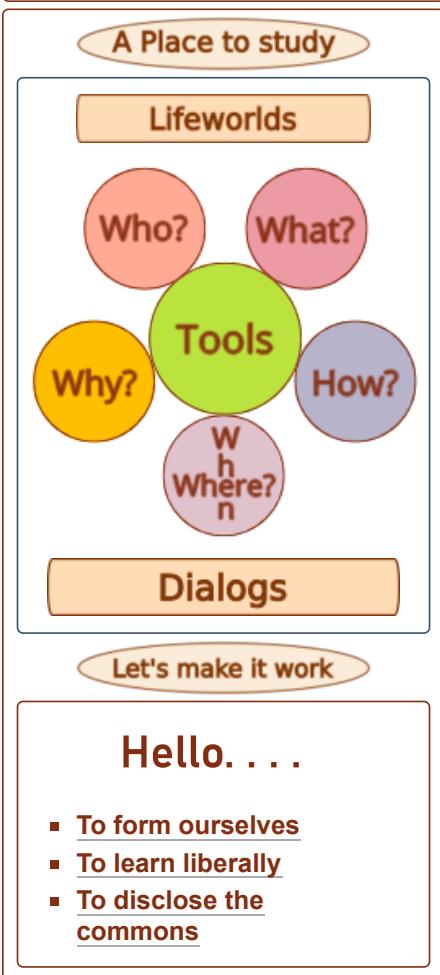
What can a fertilized egg do? It can grow, absorbing nutrition according to a metabolism, which is complicated from the get-go compared to dead molecular processes, but simple compared to its emerging metabolic systems. It's all programmed, we say. But is it actually? completely? just in what sense? There are decision points, balances maintained, developmental forks all turning on flows of information with sensitive feedback patterns triggering actions that have significant formative consequences. All these unfold throughout our lives, throughout the lives of all living organisms, and only a minuscule fraction of the decision points in them enter into our conscious lives. But those that do enter into our awareness have substantial significance for the course and quality of our lives and we concern ourselves for them as problems of self-formation.<sup>Anno</sup>

Likewise, we face an imperative, embedded deeply in how we must live our lives, to learn liberally. At birth, we find ourselves knowing nothing, thrown into the world. Each newly born life faces a big puzzle — how do we find out what can happen in it? We don't know enough yet to respond slavishly according to a careful utilitarian calculus. We explore, probe, try this and that, follow our curiosity. Watch an infant, newly seated in a high chair. What does it do? It drops things, over and over, a supremely useless achievement. It spills things and watches liquid flow. It stomps on a puddle and wonders why is splashes. Wet feet? That doesn't matter. Let mother make her fuss! Why?

Ah! Exactly, it's because — Why? The question matters! Will the spoon drop? Why does it fall? Why doesn't it just stay put, there in the air, in the place where I pushed it? It took humanity many generations to answer that question well, but to the infant the question seems natural, an obvious first starting point — poke life and its world and all at once ask who-why-what-how-where. Look. That happened! Hunh? Knowing begins in wonder, the urge to learn liberally.

And then there is the commons. How does the civic space of the infant or child appear to it?<sup>Anno</sup> The infant quickly and forcefully expresses its vulnerability crying out its disquiet for all to hear. It is not a cowering expression of fear, but one of vulnerability, insufficiency, an expectant call for help. It is not a possessive self-assertion, but more a reaching out to the altruism of others. As the infant becomes

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a child, with growing independence, it quite naturally acquires and expresses that independence within the sphere of common usages, and we all largely go on to conduct our lives within the frameworks set by the common law.

Those who would claim for the practices of possessive individualism a exclusive grounding in natural law have much explaining still to do. A kind of selfish altruism seems a more natural basis for human sociability — each feels less vulnerable and more likely to achieve fulfillment by grounding their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness on their commonalities with the rest of humanity. The common law of intellectual property clearly states that it all belongs to humanity in common and that exceptions subjecting parts of it to private ownership occur expressly to create incentives to facilitate the advance of intellectual activity for the benefit of all. Efforts to disclose the intellectual commons insofar as possible independent of the incentives created by privatization are entirely consonant with prevailing practices.

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# To form ourselves

On *A Place to Study*, what do we mean by *to form ourselves*? We all pretty much grow up in similar ways. We develop, start to toddle and talk, play, go to school and learn similar stuff, better or worse. At a certain point, we decide our parents didn't know everything and then soon enough learn that we don't either. It all seems to happen in a flow of experience that mostly comes to us by surprise. Suddenly we've gotten formed in the school of life. But let's not objectify ourselves excessively.

Stuff does happen this way, more or less as we look at it through the portal of the fictitious observer, but our lives take place as our lived experience, which is the seat of our seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, judging, doing, suffering, and enjoying — for each, the locus of life. Much of what takes place in my lived experience takes place independent of my conscious perception, will, or control, but that is not reason for me to think that it is not part of my lived experience, belonging instead to some abstract developmental process. All of it sustains the lives we live. Somehow we have to form the whole of it.

*Know thyself* puts a difficult imperative to us, for it requires that we take into account not only the parts of ourselves we know in conscious awareness, but also those we do not know, or know poorly, or even know deceptively, parts we cannot know directly, however much we feel and experience with and through them. And *know thyself* requires further that we anticipate how this complex, unknowable self will react to forces and actions impinging on us from without, about which we are ignorant and confused. We can't simply say, "Oy! This is too much!" For in its fullness, we live this life, which we suffer and enjoy, for worse or for better, in and through our full subjectivity.

By *to form ourselves*, we do not expect that we will make all the hidden uncertainties and complexities fully clear and docile, bringing all junctures to a positive conclusion. Self-ignorance and circumstantial complications will always bedevil us as integral parts of our full selves, and no omnipotent onlooker will, by a stroke of science or belief, render them transparent in reflection or action. We can, however, through our study, work to strengthen our judgment, to recognize and anticipate difficulties we would otherwise blunder into. Assessing better the sources of uncontrolled difficulties, we can marginally improve the situation of our complete selves and achieve fuller, more meaningful lives as we direct ourselves in interacting with our actual circumstances. By *to form ourselves*, we mean trying to do all that to the best of our powers.

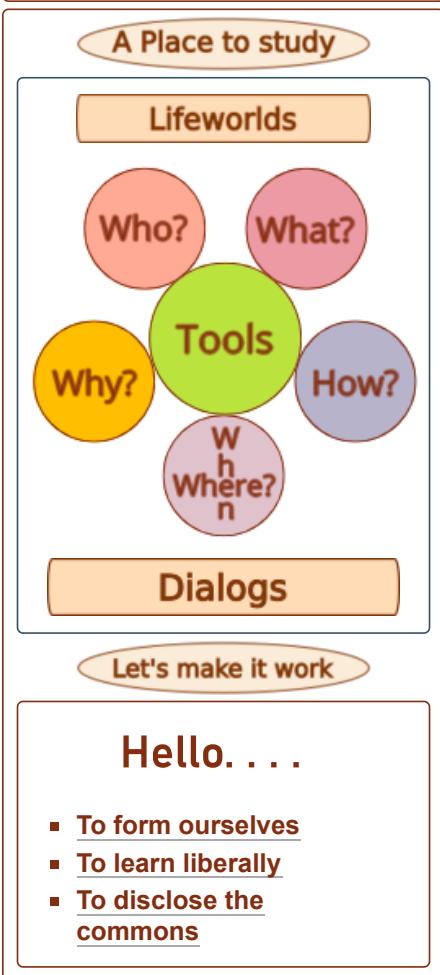
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# Disclosing the commons

During the modern era, material means of production and consumption worked best using principles of enclosure, figuratively and literally fencing people, places, and things off to exploit their potentialities in a concentrated, well-organized manner. A post-modern era is beginning in which digital means to realize our hopes and purposes are complementing the familiar material ones with different constraints and possibilities.

Digital systems function best as networks that are logically unbounded and inclusive in which dis-closure supplants en-closure as the optimal path for development. Everyone, everywhere, witting or unwitting, like it or not, are participating in the early emergence of the digital commons, as we slowly work out the optimal ways to put information technologies in the service of our aspirations, fully human and deeply humane.

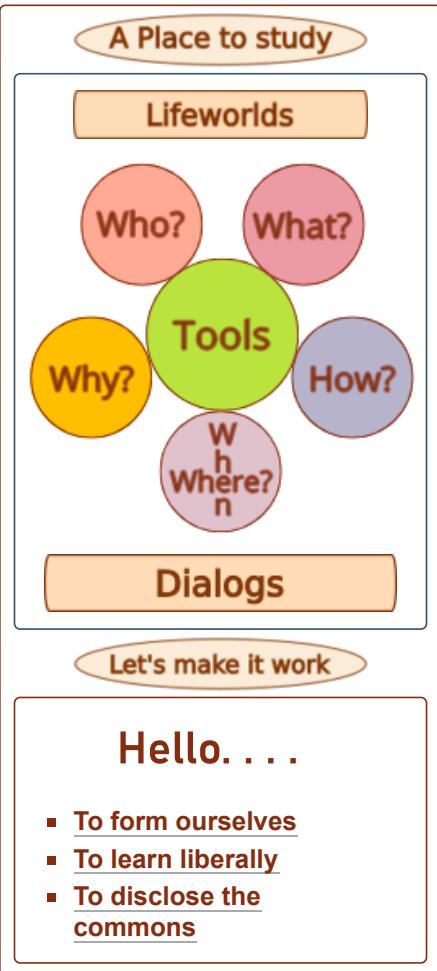
Creating, recording, storing, retrieving, transmitting, and organizing cultural resources has always required material media, expensive to produce and awkward to use. Only privileged elites and specialists could employ them fully. Most people *learned about* primary cultural resources secondhand, and rarely gained experience *working with* them. Electronic media have different affordances and constraints, which still we neither understand nor exploit well. Let's change that.

On *A Place to Study* we can enable ourselves and others to work as ordinary people to employ extensive cultural resources directly, when, where, and with whom we like, for purposes that we choose. Our challenge — setting up and maintaining a full, well-organized, easily used collection of important cultural resources and making it freely available to ourselves and everyone else for creative use by anyone, anytime, anywhere — will help to bring major historic possibilities to fruition.

- Tools—catalogs, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, collections, chronologies, programs, and much more—empower the work of intellect. Online, the powerful ones are usually as easy or easier to use than the simple ones!
- We include attention to language, especially to the verbs with which we speak about our actions, and to our concepts with which we shape our powers of perception, action, and control.
- We assemble, read, and assess masterwork, diverse creative achievements that set a bar of excellence for aspiration, judgment, and taste.
- We single out diverse persons, enigmas of virtue and vice, and hone our understanding of human possibility by contemplating their strengths and weaknesses as evident in their efforts to cope with their life circumstances.
- We explore places, mentalities, junctures, and styles to uncover how people have formed them and themselves in interaction with them.

## Jacques Barzun on intellect as a

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## Resources on the commons

- E. P. Thompson ([https://www.amazon.com/Customs-Common-Studies-Traditional-Popular-ebook/dp/B015VN57YE/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?keywords=e.+p.+thompson&qid=1640012079&sr=8-2](https://www.amazon.com/Customs-Common-Studies-Traditional-Popular-ebook/dp/B015VN57YE/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=e.+p.+thompson&qid=1640012079&sr=8-2)), *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (1993)
- Lewis Hyde (<https://www.amazon.com/Gift-Creative-Spirit-Tranforms-World-ebook/dp/B07V>

Intellect is the capitalized and communal form of live intelligence; it is intelligence stored up and made into habits of discipline, signs and symbols of meaning, chains of reasoning and spurs to emotion —a shorthand and a wireless by which the mind can skip connectives, recognize ability, and communicate truth. Intellect is at once a body of common knowledge and the channels through which the right particle of it can be brought to bear quickly, without the effort of redemonstration, on the matter in hand. . . . Intellect is community property and can be handed down. . . . And though Intellect neither implies nor precludes intelligence, two of its uses are—to make up for the lack of intelligence and to amplify the force of it by giving it quick recognition and apt embodiment. . . . Intellect is . . . a product of social effort and an acquirement.

1. Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect* (New York: HarperCollins

Perennial Classics, 1959, 2020) pp. 4-5.

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# A guide to our dialogs

(To be revised)

It's best to start with a sample...

- Hello — An introductory dialog about *A Place to Study*.
- For its own sake — V and R try to make sense of what it means to do something for its own sake.
- Persons, not individuals — Why we don't speak of individuals on *A Place to Study*.
- Verbs — Reflecting on how verbs work in communicating meaning (draft in progress).

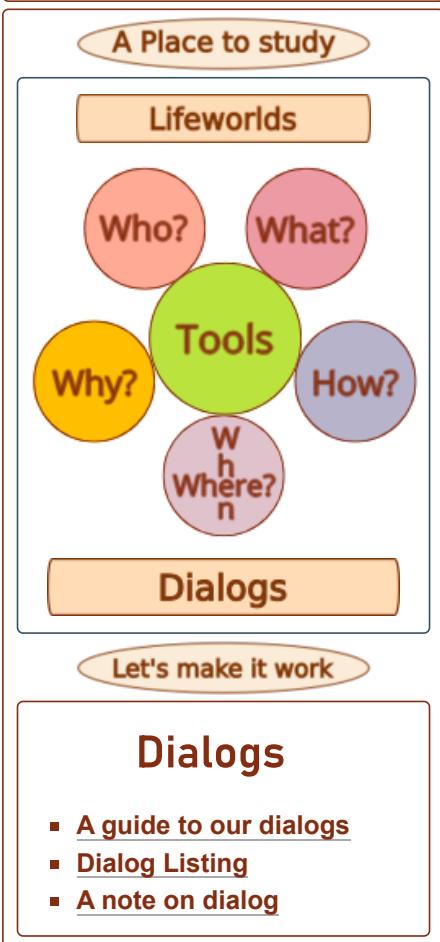
Study and dialog go together. As persons study, they motivate, initiate, direct, modulate, conclude, and assess their own activities. Our inner dialogs form a key part of all that. They manifest the interactivity of our inner voices, the locus of our intentional lives. Those inner voices do not speak with the authority of certain knowledge or absolute command. We preface what they say with qualifiers, tacit or inwardly spoken: "I think...." "I wonder...." "I might...." "People say...." "She told Jim... but I heard...." and so on. These inward dialogs do not direct us; they spur, caution, alert, suggest; they calm, assure, anger, or frighten us; they inform us, leading up to our forming our intention, our actually venturing the purposeful action. And as that unfolds in the face contingencies, the inner voices often keep going, informing how we might possibly modulate our effort.

We are not alone with our inner voices, having to make up our minds in splendid isolation. Each of us, insofar as it concerns what we try to do intentionally, sits at the controls of decision at that present point — now, the present — that moves along with us on the vector of time. Our intention snaps our informing anticipation into our contingent action. But cultural resources greatly expand and deepen our dialog of inner voices informing our exercise of judgment at that point. We study to sample, select, and internalize resources of the culture to integrate them into our inner voices and the dialogs we generate to inform our decisions and actions.

Here a problem of cultural prodigality arises. The external culture has become so extensive, multisided, authoritative, and obtuse that we face difficulties acquiring elements of it as contingent resources that we sample and select, making them a useful part of our inner lives. The culture seems to stand over and against us with imperative requirements that we must acquiesce to, like it or not. We all tune it out to greater or lesser degree. A large part of what we mean when we speak of feeling alienated comes about when those external voices commandeer our own inner dialog and expropriate our power of decision with commands, prohibitions, and subtle subversions.

In the face of this cultural abundance, our abilities to integrate external resources into our inner dialogs weakens. Partly, we find the integration daunting and we tend to give up on various types of resources. "I don't have an ear for music...." "I'm not good at math...." "Who am I to have an opinion...?" "Who cares...?" And partly we accept various forms of double consciousness, acting in accord with convention, the rules, smart money, what's in, our crowd, and on while limiting our sense of judgment to a few areas close to home. At times, Everyone uses both tactics, withdrawal and conformity, to circumscribe the exercise of judgment.

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Let's recognize these limitations as facts of life here on *A Place to Study* and everywhere. But let's further recognize that both in life and here, on a place to study, we can and should work explicitly to strengthen our capacities to grasp complexities through inward dialog. In doing that, short written dialogs that model the process of integrating engagement with different forms of cultural resources into our inner pursuit of understanding can have a special value. Generally, these dialogs have two interlocutors who share mutual respect while spanning differences in age and experience, with both engaging together in an open-ended inquiry. They aim to inform a sense of what may be at stake in the matter at hand, not to determine opinions or intentions about it.

Each dialog has a distinctive topic, but after the fact we've started to group some around a common concern, for instance, Thinking about the Place, Motivating study, Making study work, and On learning liberally. Since groupings aren't boxes bounding the dialogs in them. One dialog may appear in several groups, some in none, and as the list of dialogs grows, so may the set of groups.

For the most part, the different dialogs result from reflexive study of *A Place to Study* itself as it is emerging from our efforts. We do not have a list of planned topics, and with particular dialogs, composition may lag between initiating the idea for it and actually getting started writing it and bringing it to a conclusion. Consequently, some dialogs appear to be merely a paragraph or two stating its topic. And since we list dialogs in various states of progress with drafts becoming visible to readers well before they are complete, some dialogs will seem garbled internally and abrupt where they stop, which simply means that further work on them is in process or still pending.

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Hey R! Aren't you getting a little stuck in your own head. I thought dialog involved a couple persons — Socrates and Gorgias, or people like them.

True. But in life, the inner and the outer occur as two sides of a vital actuality. With a dialog between two persons, at least two dialogs are taking place, assuming the two participants are the only ones present.

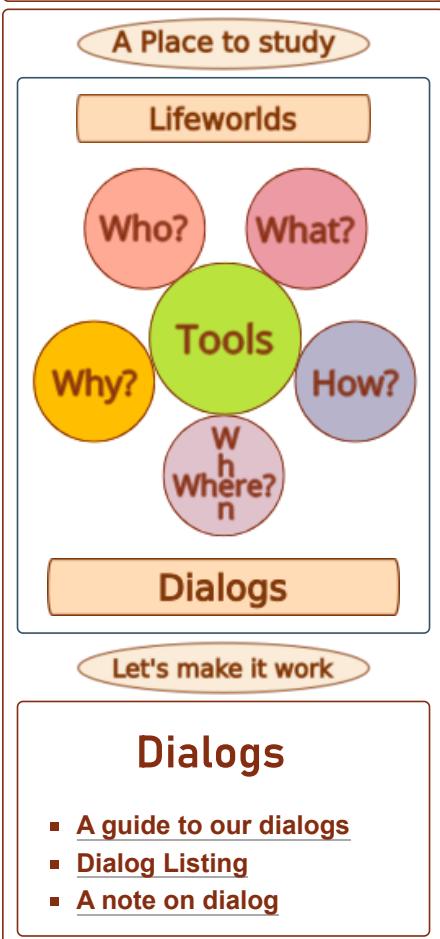
You're leaping. What's inner and outer got to do with it. It's just two persons, looking at each other talking together.

Maybe. But think of Jiminy Cricket. Do you always have only one voice in your head?

# Dialogs (substantially drafted)

- Anticipation — On a basic function of human culture (draft in progress).
- Concepts — On our use of concepts in lived experience (draft in progress).
- Concerns to study — A feeling of concern combines "can I" with "should I".
- Curating — On the meaning of *curating* on *A Place to Study* (draft in progress).
- Disclosing the commons — On disclosing the commons (initial notes).
- Five short dialogs on *Learning liberally*
  - Learn liberally — On the imperative to learn liberally.
  - Study deeply — On humanistic education taking place through a prolonged encounter.
  - Think formatively — Capacities and possibilities are unknowns disclosed by self-formation.
  - Educate tactfully — Influence reaches the inner life through tact and nuance.
  - Value sprezzatura — Making elitist traditions of liberal learning accessible to everyone. (revise)
- For its own sake — V and R try to make sense of what it means to do something for its own sake.
- Forming ourselves and our world — How can *A Place to Study* have an historical import?
- Hello — An introductory dialog about *A Place to Study*.
- Help — a dialog — Is "Help stuff" more important for persons engaged in thinking together seriously than on most social software?
- Intention — Supplanted by Forming ourselves and our world.
- My canon — Each person life-long forms her emerging canon, uniquely her own — her judgment.
- On recursing — The topic of "recursing" has broad cultural significance that merits development as this text undergoes subsequent recursive revision.
- Participating — On how self-formation and liberal learning differ from the accumulation of impersonal knowledge (draft in progress).
- Persons, not individuals — Why don't we speak of individuals on *A Place to Study*?
- Predicaments — How do predicaments differ from problems and what's their importance on *A Place to Study*?

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- Reasons to study — With self-formation and liberal learning we don't *have* set goals, we *feel* our reasons to study.
- The place — V and R imagine *A Place to Study* as a place and discuss the uses of different locations in it. (Am early draft needing much evision).
- ... self ... — V and R distinguish the self as active agent from the many identities people adopt.
- Toolshed — What tools for what purposes will persons working on *A Place to Study* want to have at hand?
- Verbs — Reflecting on how verbs work in communicating meaning (draft in progress).
- Why study historical persons? — On the value of studying the life and work of historical persons for self-formation and liberal learning (draft in progress).
- With a digital pedagogy — How a digital pedagogy will differ from one conditioned by mechanical reproduction (draft in progress).

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## Dialogs (fragments to be developed)

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- Aspiration — On seeking to rise up to meet a difficult challenge.
- Control — On how an agent naturally seeks to control, to maintain its balance, its place in ongoing processes.
- Dialog on my mind —
- Expressing meaning — We construct the meaning of expressions by grasping their import in action.
- Gratification, neither delayed nor instant — V and R discuss what makes so many websites so superficial.
- Dialog—So you want to add a page
- Local perception — Perceiving local actualities enables us to ground our purposes and values.
- My project — How a life project expresses a person's dynamic self that continually morphs in interaction with circumstances.
- Mutual recognition — Mutual recognition undergirds the reciprocities requisite for a democratic ethos and public life.
- The self as role player — V and R contemplate the uses and disadvantages of formal roles for the self as active agent.
- Who am I to ... — V and R bemoan how many people feel reluctant to form their own views about serious matters.

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# Anticipation

V 1 — You know, R, I'm a little confused by this page name. What do you mean? It doesn't make much sense to me to say, "We study anticipation."

R 2 — Fair enough. I've been wanting to find a way to group all the different forms of human communication, of expression or utterance, under one heading. I've thought about it quite a bit and most possibilities don't quite seem to work in my opinion.

V 3 — Well what's wrong with *utterance*? That seems pretty general.

R 4 — To me it's a bit ugly and not really so general. I find it hard to think of art or music as utterance. But I'm most turned off by how it objectifies intentional processes, shearing the fact of the locution from the intention of its speaker. I'd prefer *Expression*. We associate that with some meaning, not a simple grunt.

V 5 — OK, but you seem not fully satisfied with *expression*. What does it lack?

R 6 — It's pretty good, but it seems a bit too *ex post facto*, referring to something prior that it expresses. Maybe that's cutting it too fine. Expressing and thinking do connect with thinking prior to expressing. But I have a hunch that by reflecting on how *anticipating* may enter in will yield some interesting insight and I'd like to see if we might develop it. If it takes us into a cul-de-sac, we can go back to talking about expression.

V 7 — I'm game. But let me check one thing. For practical purposes, we are introducing what we study in addressing the modes of cultural expression—writing, painting, music, sculpture, photography, dance, graphic design, computer code, symbolic logic, architecture, and so on.

R 8 — Right. And I want to tentatively suggest that these are better understood as modes of anticipation, rather than modes of expression.

V 9 — And I take it you are going to suggest this understanding not from the point of view of the objective observer describing external behaviors, but that of the living person who is engaging in communicating culturally.

R 10 — Yes. A living, sentient, thinking person is using cultural forms, trying intentionally to affect other living, sentient thinking persons in particular ways, and another person, also living, sentient, thinking, is seeking intentionally to apprehend reciprocally what the first is seeking.

V 11 — Hmm. That's how I thought you would see it, how I anticipated it. Is that the anticipation we are talking about?

R 12 — In effect, in part. But I suspect it is really more complicated.

V 13 — Yeah. I should've known. It's always more complicated. Fill me in.

R 14 — [\* To be clarified and continued. \*]

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



### Dialogs

## Let's make it work

### Dialogs

- [A guide to our dialogs](#)
- [Dialog Listing](#)
- [A note on dialog](#)

# Concepts

V 1 — Hey, isn't there a difference between a *concept* and a *keyword*? Why jam them together? You usually don't seem indecisive.

R 2 — Uncertainty doesn't always signify indecision. Keywords help us classify forms of experience; concepts enter more generatively into how we construct the various forms of experience. They have to do with making experience possible.

V 3 — If keywords classify the forms of experience, why not just go with them? It would lead to a full picture of cultural experience.

R 4 — Ah! But does that help us fully experience our cultural possibilities? Keywords label how people have thought, felt, judged, and acted. Concepts seem to enter into our bringing all that to pass. Diverse intellectual and emotional experiences seem to come about closely linked with various concepts, but we don't understand much at all about how.

V 5 — Hmm. It may be hard to grasp how any particular concept relates to a relevant experience, but I have the feeling you are making a more sweeping statement to the effect that we don't understand much about how concepts in general interact with experience.

R 6 — That's correct, and we won't settle it here and now. For centuries, philosophers have argued whether the reciprocal development of concepts and experience originates with the world of experience or the character of reason. Questions of origination suck us into an infinite regress. With self-formation and liberal learning, we can't address the key problems simply by finding the beginning or by adding more and more to what we know about the outcomes. We need to study the reciprocal interaction between the forming of concepts and the informing of how we think, feel, judge, and act?

V 7 — Isn't that pretty well understood? A little over a century ago, John Dewey became famous with a little book called *How We Think*.

R 8 — It was OK, especially for thinking as problem solving, but like most everyone else, Dewey really wrote about "how he thought" as it appeared retrospectively, recalling how he and others had solved problems. Cognitive scientists are getting closer to the actual dynamics of thinking, but even their data depends on external correlates of what has actually taken place. We cannot see, touch, feel what is happening as it is happening through molecular transactions deep within a complex neural network.

V 9 — Isn't that what they call the "hard problem of consciousness"? Do you think anyone will ever figure it out?

R 10 — Perhaps computer scientists will assemble simulacra of it, but I suspect even in those the problem of grasping the experience of what is taking place will remain. Personally, I would guess that it is a variant of the Uncertainty Principle—you can only observe the phenomenon by stopping or deflecting it.

V 11 — Well, let's assume your guess is correct and we will never know what's taking place with concepts in the experience of thinking, feeling, judging. That leaves us with the question of how concepts actually inform our thinking, feeling, judging, and acting.

R 12 — Although we don't know how these processes take place, we can observe reciprocal interactions between our experiencing ourselves and our world and our ongoing construction of an ideal conceptual repertoire. Over time we would need to explore, test, and develop the proposition, but I think a good deal of what we mean by self-formation has to do with the inward

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



### Dialogs

#### Let's make it work

### Dialogs

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experience of concept formation, the lived experience of grasping and forming various concepts. And I think further that what we mean by liberal learning involves our becoming able as the autonomous, self-directed agents of our own activities, to turn the various concepts we grasp and form outward by using them to control what we do in and through our activities. And those activities always turn up unexpected results, which stand as the measure of our continued ignorance.

V 13 — Hey! Don't stop there. You know I'm going to ask for an example. Let's start with a very basic one—*space* or *time*, for instance. How do concepts like them pertain to our experiencing the world?

R 14 — Sorry. Bracket what I just said—I get carried away at times. Let's think about *space* as a concept that enters into our construction of experience. Most of us would have difficulty in giving a clear statement of our concept of space and many might even deny that they have such a concept. But I think it is fair to infer that everyone—even the great majority of animals—seem to develop and apply a concept of space defined by three axes that intersect at right angles to each other with impressive precision, speed, and flexibility.

V 15 — Help me grasp this thought.

R 16 — If things were just anywhere, just where it was relative to us at the instant of perception, we would have serious difficulty doing anything in the world. A concept of space allows us to orient things to ourselves and to perceive and act relative to them.

V 17 — Isn't that a simple matter, built into perception? Why do I need a concept of space?

R 18 — A simple matter! What do you mean by "built into?" That's the concept. The newborn infant lacks developed spatial perception.

V 19 — Oh. Yeah. It takes some months before they can locate things in space well relative to themselves. So what is the concept they develop?

R 20 — Stand up straight, look forward, and raise your arms with the index fingers pointing left and right, level with your line of sight. Imagine yourself to be three lines intersecting behind your eyes, extending straight, the vertical up and down, the line of sight forward and back, and the left-right line outward from your fingers. Those axes define the conceptual space of your lived experience. As you move—bob and weave, lie down and jump up, twirl, dance, and somersault—these axes tilt and turn with our movements. A fairly simple recalibration of coordinates allow us to track the relation of objects around us in our efforts to act intentionally on or with them. That is the conceptual space of lived experience. Don't try driving without it.

V 21 — OK. I guess when I feel dizzy with all that twirling and somersaulting, it indicates that I haven't been able to keep up with the recalibration. But you've really only described a kind of *as if* concept. Should we perhaps call it a *capacity*, as distinct from a *concept*? I see how I might start thinking about a rudimentary working capacity and develop a concept that describes what I can do through the capacity, and then I might revise the concept and experiment with the capacity and set up a kind of back and forth between the two, improving each in its own way.

R 22 — Excellent. The concept serves as our intellectual construct to describe, interpret, and explain the existential working of the capacity. With the concept of space, we just considered the concept visually, but the spacial axes work with sound, but somewhat differently, communicating presence more than relative location. To touch they may communicate something about location and to substance as well, to smell something about their condition, and to taste about their composition. And as experience changes, develops, we adjust the concept as well.

V 23 — Yeah. I think my spacial capacity includes a mapping of my body around the intersection of the axes as flexible boundaries allowing me to prevent collisions with stuff around me. When I learned to drive, I remember after a little experience developing a sense of the car's dimensions as an extension of my own boundaries, enabling me to drive close by or under things, relatively confident the car wouldn't hit them.

R 24 — Right. The concept facilitates forms of experience and novel experience elicits changes in our concepts.

V 25 — I'm catching on. Let's talk quickly about *time*. Is it more or less like *space*?

R 26 — More or less, I think. We might think of it as another line intersecting with the spatial axes, here and now, projecting forward towards the future and backwards from the past, but it is hard to visualize because our vision takes place with our three dimensional spatial construction. As a concept, time enables us to consider experience of possibility, actuality, and stability — things that might take place, things that are happening, and things that continue or endure with greater or less degree of permanence.

V 27 — Interesting. Are there other really basic concepts that we use in constructing other forms of experience?

R 28 — Probably, but the responses are a little more controversial among those who have thought seriously about things like ethical and aesthetic experience — assertions of obligation and judgments of beauty and taste, for instance. Many suggest that in thinking about ourselves and our circumstances in our lifeworld, we work with a fairly limited set of operational concepts for making judgments about quantities, qualities, relations, and modalities.

V 29 — I might ask you to explain "modalities," but let's move on. This is quickly getting complicated and I can see that for various types of experience — historical, political, economic, religious, social, and so on — we will find complicated generative concepts. For each, I'm sure people have found ample opportunity for disagreement and confusion.

R 30 — Too true. And let's not get hung up on all that. For our purposes, whether we describe or state various concepts "correctly," for instance as I may or may not have done with *space*, is not so important, for the verbal statement of the concept will radically differ from the concept as it works in the lived experience of a person — people can talk a good game about "justice" while acting a bit otherwise.

V 31 — Are you suggesting a radical disjunction between life experience and language?

R 32 — Not a complete separation, but connection quite short of a direct linkage, one "through a glass darkly," as the Bible put it.

V 33 — Hey! You're not stopping there, are you?

R 34 — Sorry, but I think I have to. Remember what we said about people find nearly impossible to comprehend the linkage between existential capacity and rational concepts. Well, here's a task for you!

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# Concerns to study

V and R discuss how concerns to study arise when in lived experience we emotionally bind an active process (a verb) with an objective of worth (a noun), which leads to a feeling of concern, a combined "can I" and "should I".

V 1 — Hey! R, wait up a moment. I'm a bit concerned about this talk about *concerns*. On my campus, anxiety nearly paralyzes too many students. They feel great pressure to keep grades high. The syllabuses are highly prescriptive while actual feedback is often minimal and confusing. They sense a real threat of getting pushed out. Don't you risk adding to the tension? Grades, jobs, climate, political dysfunction, social disruption, a pandemic—who needs more angst?

R 2 — Yeah. Where I taught there was both too much anxiety and too much complacency. Let's think of concern as the healthy balance of the free person eager to live their own life, neither anxious nor complacent.

V 3 — Well, that'd be nice. But a lot of our culture nurtures the extremes—insinuating worries and anxieties while pushing highly engineered forms of instant gratification. An equilibrium between the two does not come easily.

R 4 — Maybe. Agitation and quiescence may be conditions one cannot fix because neither generalized anxiety nor complacent distraction have causes properly speaking. They simply happen in vital space that is empty of alternatives. You know, "nature abhors a vacuum."

V 5 — You mean, say, that despair isn't caused by something; it emerges when someone doesn't hope and assert a purpose?

R 6 — Possibly. I think we should pay attention to the concerns we feel, not as an absence, but as an important presence, the need to do something because doing so has value for self-development. I'm not sure coming to grips with those concerns will lessen anxiety or diminish the flux of distraction. Let's respect the ancient healer's injunction, "Do no harm." Let's act in ways that themselves have value, not because of a vague hope that it will correct things we think are wrong in current practice.

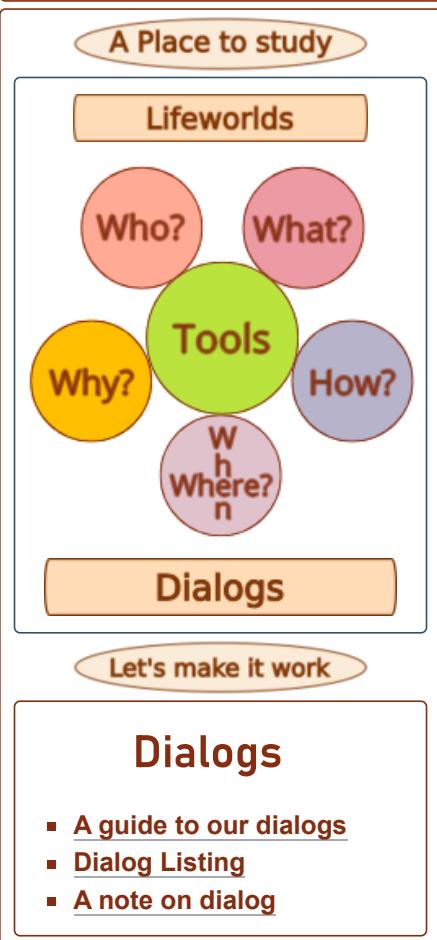
V 7 — That's a little obscure, but let's go on. I'm concerned to grasp what you mean more clearly. You're saying, I guess, that you are not going to try to correct the ills of campus life because you don't know how. Instead you're going to try something quite different, off campus in a very basic way. I get that, so tell me about concerns as you think they should work in *A Place to Study*. Others will talk later about side effects, good and bad.

R 8 — Great. *Concern* comes about necessarily in acting freely, inwardly, with one's will determined neither by the external authority of others nor by passive submission to the force of circumstances. Acting autonomously puts both *can* and *should* integrally in question.

V 9 — Ah ha! I heard my grand dad talking once about his time as a draftee in Vietnam, saying how he would do things without a second thought when the lieutenant ordered it, even though as a civilian such a thought would have paralyzed him with doubt and anxiety. The soldier's training and the exigencies of battle blot out the concern over "can" and "should" in autonomous action that you're talking about.

R 10 — Yeah. I think all acting, no matter how constrained, has qualities of intentionality that imbue it simultaneously with tensions of "can" and "should". Am I able to do that and is that something I should do? Circumstances, however, often overwhelm this two-sided concern—I act, right or wrong, well

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or ill. short-circuiting the concern. In the military example you introduce, I think it is significant how a well-run military does not suppress the "can" and "should" inherent in acting, but tries to take it carefully into account.

V 11 — How so? What my grand dad was saying seems to suggest that the army had greatly suppressed those concerns compared to civilian life.

R 12 — It looks that way, but in principle, despite prominent breakdowns, with the chain of command and practices of battlefield training the military tries hard to manage the "can" and the "should" to serve the very specialized function of military organization. In principle, the training of each person in the military organization deals with the "can" by imparting the skills necessary to perform effectively the functions he or she will need to perform through the engagement of battle. And in principle the military takes care of the "should" by requiring that up and down the chain of command everyone binds themselves to working within the rules of engagement, which should clearly differentiate between permissible and impermissible actions.

V 13 — Uh. I think I see that in principle. But I've seen several war movies, most recently *1917*, which graphically suggest that in reality things in principle don't go very far.

R 14 — Too true. "The fog of war" is proverbial. All the same, with the military, and other risky, large-scale systems like air transportation, it is important to maintain the quality of training, a chain of command, and rules of engagement. But everywhere the spontaneity, complexity, and unpredictability of life in its fullness confront us with continuous, many-sided concerns about our *can and should* uncertainties. These require study, not training.

V 15 — Life in the barracks isn't my picture of human fulfillment! So I guess we will feel concern about what we can and should do integrally as part of a full life, lived autonomously. But how can and should we study it? Ha! Here's that circle again!—We're concerned about our concern and feel the need to study how we can and should study it!

R 16 — That's life! It's worth listening to Frank Sinatra sing it sometime. How might we start studying our concern about how we can and should study our concerns?

V 17 — Well, maybe we can think about vital functions somewhat differently so that they pertain across all or many situations for action, not only specific, highly structured ones.

R 18 — That seems promising. Can you suggest how we might begin to identify those vital functions important in determining what we can and should do in any life situation?

V 19 — Oy! Yeah, I know—to begin we need to begin. But look at our schools and colleges. The military way seems to be used all over the place. Start with the outcomes, give instruction on the steps that lead to it, and then trust that an assessment of the results will suffice for a chain of command.

R 20 — Well, all that starts with particular *whats*, specific outcomes, matters about which we might feel concern. Can we examine the feeling itself? Perhaps we will find more generality there. What are we feeling when we feel concern, not when we feel concern about x, y, or z?

V 21 — It's hard to isolate it and I'm not at all sure, but here's a try—concern arises for me whenever I feel myself in a consequential situation with multiple possibilities apparently open to me. Then I'm concerned about what I can and should do, and sometimes the situation forces me to act and I just do it, like right now, the situation forces me speak and to say what I'm saying.

R 22 — Well, you know, that says a lot. Every person's life includes a great variety of unscripted situations, some with crucial import, in which multiple possibilities appear to be open to them and they are going to have to go with the capacities they have at hand and be decisive on the fly. That's thinking and acting on one's feet.

V 23 — OK, but I don't see how we study these concerns. It is hard to see it whole, all at once. I'm looking at things from inside my life and I can't get out of my life to see everything in it whole. Maybe that's the key to the difference between the arts and the sciences.

R 24 — Quite possibly. Certainly in studying we practice an art, not a science. Let's be content to keep working to understand it in our lives. I think we are recognizing that to study our concerns we need to inquire into how we can best comport ourselves in situations of complex import having to make do with our capacities. Let's look at how general human capacities, modes of acting, link to broad forms of import, matters of worth to us.

V 25 — That's pretty abstract. Are you trying to put together a capacity, say to express ourselves, and a broad value, say, to have meaning for us? We might study as a general concern how we can express ourselves meaningfully. Is that a good example?

R 26 — Yes, excellent. There's no definitive list, but I think if we consider cultural achievements, we can identify a number of capacities for acting in the world and an associated sense of worth, of fulfillment, to which the capacity conduces. These would be concerns leading to full lives.

V 27 — That sounds good, but I have a question. Linking a mode of acting with a related form of worth, we might identify "upholding value" as another general concern for study. How would that differ from studying ethics as now done in college?

R 28 — To my mind, studying a concern to uphold value concentrates attention much more on historical realities of lived life. When you abandon the duality, looking only at the verb or the noun in it, you get either a crass instrumentalism or an airy discussion of abstract universals. To hold the center we must preserve the tension. Things have let go and historically we are getting polities in which even the law is nothing but an instrument of dominating power, while academic intellectuals serve up an ethics of hypotheticals. Upholding value in lived experience takes place situationally. It is difficult and not at all clear cut. Let's embrace it, not tut-tut it as relativistic.

V 29 — I was going to ask whether study had room for strong emotion, but I guess that's unnecessary. Emotions are the glue that bind the verb and noun together. What other verb-noun concerns might we take up?

R 30 — Well, I suspect the list could get long, but I prefer to keep it short and diverse. In experience, basic concerns will overlap a lot and including too many may tend to diffuse attention. With a short list we can study its components intensively and have vigorous debates about adding and dropping possibilities. Here's my initial list— Expressing meaning, Directing desire, Exercising autonomy, /Empowering knowledge, Upholding values, Overcoming alienation, Understanding difference, and Sharing commonalities. And here is an intimation of how the list could get long.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>Empowering history</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Assessing worth</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Loving completion</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Providing sustenance</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Maintaining health</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Achieving wellbeing</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Wanting satisfaction</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Imparting wisdom</u></li> <li>▪ <u>Studying significance</u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Recognizing merit</u></li> <li>• <u>Finding happiness</u></li> <li>• <u>Contemplating beauty</u></li> <li>• <u>Doing good</u></li> <li>• <u>Administering justice</u></li> <li>• <u>Respecting order</u></li> <li>• <u>Justifying ambition</u></li> <li>• <u>Exemplifying excellence</u></li> <li>• <u>Fostering maturity</u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Cultivating humanity</u></li> <li>• <u>Teaching tradition</u></li> <li>• <u>Demonstrating skill</u></li> <li>• <u>Instituting discipline</u></li> <li>• <u>Assuaging suffering</u></li> <li>• <u>Forgiving trespass</u></li> <li>• <u>Clarifying confusion</u></li> <li>• <u>Dispelling superstition</u></li> </ul>
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V 31 — You know, it's interesting. Frankly I feel I need to go off and really think, quietly and hard, about what we've been saying because I'm not sure I clearly grasp the steps we've gone through and I'm uncertain whether or not I think they are sound. But what strikes me is how uncomfortable my teachers, up and down the instructional ladder would be if students expected them to illuminate such concerns. They wouldn't dismiss them as trivial or obvious, but they would be uncomfortable with them, *concerned* whether *addressing such concerns* is something they can and should do as teachers in the instructional system. These are concerns that people have, all people have as part of being human, but as soon as we get into abstract roles, they become a bit foreign, out of bounds. It nevertheless behooves us, as persons, to study them. I feel that's part of what draws me to a place to study.

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# Curating

*I will let this dialog to stand as it is for a while, but I intend to pull it apart to make two dialogs, one on "Curating one's life" and the other on "Leisure." But for a few weeks I will work on other things before returning to it with a fresher sensibility. Should anyone have comments on the current version, however, those would be very helpful in the rewriting.*

V 1 — You know, R, I worry you are exaggerating the importance of easy access to cultural resources through digital media. Check out an airport newsstand. Amidst all the schlock, you can find a "good" book or two for about the price of a sandwich.

R 2 — That's right, V. That's part of our fast-food ethos — carry it on with your sandwich, speed-read it on the plane, and chuck it in the trash while dashing for your luggage. We want to establish a different sort of presence for primary cultural resources, something like Slow Food for the mind.

V 3 — Yeah. But we seem to have too much access and with social media every passing thought becomes public — in a chaos all utterances are mute. How are you going to fix that?

R 4 — Slowly. Very slowly. And since I'm old, you're going to fix it, you and your children, and their children. But we should begin to fix it now, and I think you've identified how we need start.

V 5 — I have? I simply restated a famous quip. Everyone is spewing everything out into the public, creating a chaos in which nothing has significance. How does that identify how we should begin?

R 6 — We need to stay steady in the surrounding chaos that presses in on us. Starting to thrash about, tweeting anxiously to followers, just adds to the nonsense. We cannot calm chaos by trying to act on it. Its churning complexity far exceeds anyone's ability to control it. The clatter of the take-way disrupts deliberation. A clash of contending conclusions reduces reasoning to a rat-a-tat-tat of bullet points. An ecology of thoughtlessness steadily spreads thickets of random memes.

V 7 — Don't stop there! We need a straw to grasp!

R 8 — Instead of trying to act on and through the chaos, we can and should disengage from it, we can and should create a place for the self expression and thoughtful discussion of possibilities. Questions, not conclusions. A growing understanding, not certainties. There, as we reason, we can cross out the bullet points, ignore the take-aways, and efface the emojis in order to act with alert judgment on what seems, all things considered, the better alternative. That course might expand into a stable sphere of meanings, as we, one by one, add our capacities for disciplined communication together, enlarging its scope and power, diminishing one by one the thrashers in the chaos.

V 9 — I see how the extrinsic incentives of public life drive the eager excesses, the urge to make a point, whatever it might be. But I have to say, I'm nevertheless a little ambivalent. We live in representative systems of governance and as citizens we have duties of active participation and we live in free enterprise systems and marketplace incentives work to correlate production and consumption efficiently and effectively. Or so I'm told. Don't we have to play along to get along?

R 10 — Perhaps. Up to a point. But as in all things, we must judge, what is enough. Each has to take conventional expectations into account and decide what to do. But don't confuse the realities in theory with how they actually

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



### Dialogs

## Let's make it work

### Dialogs

- [A guide to our dialogs](#)
- [Dialog Listing](#)
- [A note on dialog](#)

operate. As best you can, take all the sectors of experience into account, for actuality does not conform to the limits of our specialties. The chaos is not simply political, simply economic, or social, or technological, or artistic, or cultural. And in proposing to disengage from the chaos, I don't mean to suggest that we can somehow physically escape from it. It is a question of how we direct our attention, how we use our intelligence. We can withhold attention from the chaos, judging it devoid of significance. Instead of it, we can recognize a universe of cultural resources, comprehensive yet selective, and work out their uses vis-à-vis our own first-person experience of our lives. Let's curate the resources with which we form ourselves and learn liberally.

V 11 — Doesn't that risk creating a kind of orthodoxy, one which will become sterile and uncreative?

R 12 — That could happen, but it will be unlikely if we keep it unbounded and open. A *universe* of cultural resources implies a selection so copious that any person or group can at most claim substantial understanding of only a small part of it. We place far too much importance on needing to share a few canonical sources. Thinking thrives as we bring differences into interaction.

V 13 — Hmm. OK, but a lot of what we encounter in the chaos comes to us seemingly grounded by authoritative study, tests of comprehension, retention, agreement, willingness to act, effectiveness demonstrated with careful control for confounding factors. But what we're saying, I guess, implies that I have to be sure that the grounds the studies control for are ones that coincide with the grounds of my intention. It's all in the recognition that to begin we just have to begin. We could keep weighing *why* and *why not* forever. By beginning, we see what starts happening, and then having begun, we can decide to continue or stop or adjust. Possibly as others see the emergent results, they will opt to join in, and some may drop out. So let's begin — we can't keep going unless we begin!

R 14 — Right. And that's what we're already doing! We are starting to organize resources for study as a copious, cumulative sampling of the cultural resources achieved by our predecessors, which all persons now hold in common. In sampling them, we should illuminate the value that specific resources have in supporting a person's lifelong effort to form and fulfill her human potentials. Let's develop procedures through which contributors to *A Place to Study* can expand and winnow the sample of resources for study. As users of the place, we build by continually assessing how various works we put on it support our self-formation and liberal learning as users of it. It should be a recursively circular effort.

V 15 — I'm eager, but I do have one more question. When I first expressed some skepticism about the idea of access, you said something about "a different sort of presence for primary cultural resources." Did you have something special in mind in using *presence* rather than *access* or *availability* or something else?

R 16 — Yes. Significant educative resources work through their presence, especially the resources facilitating liberal learning. These resources don't make a difference in life through a one-shot encounter. We all learned that even a good vaccine needs recurrent boosters or revaccination after a time. Important cultural resources need to be at hand, on your mind, easy to bring into your attention. They will be different resources for each person, but whatever they are, they have greatest value through their continuous presence. *A Place to Study* should become a cornucopia of resources enabling persons to choose and nurture the presence of the specific ones each selects as they conduct their lives. A cultural work becomes valuable as a person becomes familiar with it, knows it's there, available to use whenever needed — at times a

comfortable retreat, a source of illumination in perplexity, of calm in anxiety, and of solace in sorrow. Each should make their choice of such works with personal care, not the inertia of convention.

V 17 — Yeah. I guess that's why a couple semesters of Western Civ didn't actually have the influence on me and my friends touted for it. It was another of the requirements to get the degree.

R 18 — We can now make the resources supporting self-formation and liberal learning into a continuous, dependable, free and open presence for everyone, lifelong wherever they are. Of course we cannot ensure that anyone will make use of that presence. But throughout history up to now the possibility of these resources having a presence in most persons' lifeworld simply did not exist — it took time, effort, a good deal of money, and yes even power to assemble them into a collection in the everyday world of a person's life. Now we can, all of us, do it for ourselves.

V 19 — OK, I'm with you. But you know how you keep saying, to begin, begin. Well I don't see much actually beginning to give all these resources of liberal learning a real presence on *A Place to Study*, not to mention a ubiquitous presence through *A Place to Study*. Let's get substantive.

R 20 — You are right. We need to shift more attention to meriting more of a presence in people's lives. At the same time, we don't want it to come about because we have hyped it really well. Most people these days lead over-crowded lives, or so it seems to me. In a very literal sense, we are pre-occupied — inertly occupied with all sorts of stuff prior to any considered choice. It comes about through the requirements of work, keeping up in our accustomed way with entertainments, social obligations, the desires and compulsions of consumption, by the churning cycles of what we call *news*, style, and responsibilities. They can seem overwhelmingly necessary, but with care, each can prune them back. What do we need to do to attain a substantial presence for the resources of liberal learning in all that?

V 21 — Well, I'm still pretty young and I have my doubts how solid all that pre-occupation actually is. A lot of people recognized that they could live without of it during the Covid lockdowns. And I think that a lot of people are realizing that quick and easy tools of self-expression can dumb them down personally and have powerfully problematic public effects. Let's be ready with something worthy, something truly worth the while, the time spent, as people back away from their preoccupations and begin to think about how they want to use their time and energy.

R 22 — Yes, that's the sort of presence *A Place to Study* should have at the ready when a person disengages from the press of preoccupation and looks about with the sense that she can choose how and why she spends her effort. *A Place to Study* won't be the only possibility, but let's make sure it's a worthy one.

V 23 — You know, I see that disengagement happening a bit already. I'm the kind that talks to a lot of people from a lot of situations. I didn't come from half way round the world in one long plane ride. Wherever I go, I meet persons who are looking around, thinking about what they want, persons of different ages, at the top, at the bottom, in between. So you can actually say, we've begun. Now we have to ask, as we always will, "What's next?"

R 24 — Well, you understand how we liken *A Place to Study* to a city and we recognize that both visitors and residents are important to the life of a city. Now as you say, we have a few people coming to our prototype to look at work in progress and discuss it and sometimes they add comments, which are very useful. But for the most part, they check things out as proto-visitors, and you and I are sort of proto-residents. Now I think to attract an actual flow of

visitors, one sufficient for *A Place to Study* to become self-sustaining, we need a hardy group of pioneers, some initial, actual residents in our new city, who can get substantive, as you put it.

V 25 — Right. Lots of visitors aren't likely to come to a city that lacks residents unless it's some picturesque ruin on the UNESCO World Heritage list. We can keep prototyping but to get substantive, we need pioneering residents eager to join in building *A Place to Study*. So let's ask ourselves, what will be important for them to be ready and willing to do?

R 26 — Good question. My initial response may seem a little strange. But for a while we need pioneering residents who are ready and willing to go slowly. It's a common mistake in the digital world to jump into coding things too quickly, before really figuring out what you need to code and why. That can make for huge problems down the road.

V 27 — Well, it may seem strange to those who don't contemplate the collateral damages that follow when college dropouts rush to combine some clever code with grandiose ambition. We need pioneers ready to work thoughtfully in a cooperative group to create *A Place to Study* as part of the digital commons without the normal incentives that enforce a sense of discipline on an assemblage of workers. We can't just say, "Let's head west and see what happens." We need to warn off those both who just want to go as easy riders for a while and those who want to join the megarich.

R 28 — Yes. And we need to recognize and deal with, to live with another tension. The cooperative group needs to be self-directing, yet it will need to be cohesive around some fundamental aspirations.

V 29 — I think I understand your concern, but can you spell it out? I can imagine the situation arising in which a number of initial residents begin to think that some developmental necessities will be hard to bring off relying only on volunteered effort. We already made anticipate an exception with respect to building and maintaining the technical infrastructure required by the project. What do you think should be fundamental?

R 30 — We should accomplish what you call our "substantive work" through voluntary effort, and the level at which we pursue that effort should be at or very near the top attainable within the public domain.

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Topic  
Choosing  
powerful  
tools

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V 31 — That sounds good, but can you explain it some relative to practice. In particular, I'm not sure what the qualifier, "attainable within the public domain," actually means.

R 32 — Take a big limitation, that of copyright. The digital commons is, and for some time, will be significantly limited owing to copyright law. Copyright practices rest on the idea that by giving authors and/or publishers an exclusive right to copy the expressions of ideas for a specific period, the law will institute a positive incentive for the creation and dissemination such ideas. Copyright law makes very clear that the ideas are common property not subject to private ownership, except for certain limited exceptions. The length of time that the copyright exception lasts has been highly variable, usually getting progressively longer in response to well-healed lobbying, but that may change and there are fair use exceptions that we should use as fully as we can. Nevertheless, despite its obsolescence in a digital environment, copyright law will circumscribe the digital commons for a long time.

V 33 — I expect more subtle obstacles of this sort will make themselves felt and we will have to be ready to work as well as we can in spite of them. I'm wondering if there are things we should guard against up front that are not so much obstacles,

but rather potential deflections. For instance, I worry about potential pioneer residents who have worked in academe. They may skew how they work with resources on *A Place to Study* in an overly scholarly direction.

R 34 — That's for sure! I'm a living, walking example. I've made a number of prior attempts at initiating something like *A Place to Study* without actually understanding myself how subtly different it needs to be. As an academic, I had that "contribution to knowledge" in the back of my mind. When questions that come from life intersected with those from the current state of my subject, I'd write too much to cite and to be cited, giving things a patina of scholarly authority, which to most people is dull pedantry. I wanted, yes, a wide audience of general readers, provided I reached my peer group of specialists on the way. That doesn't work. Academics volunteering as pioneering residents on *A Place to Study* need to embrace writing and study in a frame quite different from that of their scholarly training and practice.

V 35 — Can you say more about how that frame differs. It seems pretty clear to me that we want to avoid the rhetoric of scholarly authority, but I also have the sense that *A Place to Study* should not be a showcase for the popularization of knowledge. How would you describe the rhetoric most appropriate to *A Place to Study*?

R 36 — You mention *knowledge* with respect to the rhetoric of both scholarship and popularization. Knowledge is of course important here. But we primarily seek insight and understanding here and for that we need to integrate what we do not know as a positive element with what we think we do know as positive elements in seeking insight and understanding. I think it generates a rhetoric that complements knowledge with intuition, filling gaps where our knowledge does not cover important aspects of a matter. That makes it tentative, but nevertheless, it serves as the "animal faith" on which we act as independent agents.

V 37 — That's food for thought! Much of which we'll have to hold for some other time. But it makes me realize that going outside the normal structure of educational incentives requires more than a pro bono service going without the normal benefits. It entails weaning oneself from the behaviors the incentivized roles reward and elicit. That goes not only for academics, as you call them, but for the others, for students, if that is what we should call aspirants within formal education. And I imagine it will affect all the forms of activity for which persons are trained and work within — executives, lawyers, bureaucrats, soldiers, public servants, technicians, even a cleric. Actually, very few of us have experience expressing ourselves as persons, saying what we think without the aid and limitation of one or another formal role shaping our thinking and acting.

R 38 — Going without the normal incentives requires a many-sided effort. And as we talk, I'm seeing some ironies. We call it *school* and talk about what it might be like without all the normal incentives that structure the institutions and behaviors within it. But school in ancient Greek originally meant *leisure* and what one did in leisure, thinking, talking, discussing things, was probably somewhat like what you and I are trying now to do. Maybe all the incentives we worry about aren't so *normal*. Their absence was the material condition making school possible, σχολή, leisurely discussion.

V 39 — Cool. But the material actuality of that leisure sat, comfy and complacent, on a political economy that restricted citizenship and used slaves widely.

R 40 — Too true, but I don't think that made leisure a bad thing. It shows that in the ancient world the conditions for its practical possibility were unjust, undesirable. And that's been the case right up to the present. All along leisure has been a way of life open only to the members of a restricted class and small elites. The leisured life is one in which people think and act relatively free of

external incentives, the attractive and compulsive forces constraining action into external conformity to predetermined behaviors. It is a life of chosen intents, not one of forced response.

V 41 — Yeah. As an undergraduate, a passage by Karl Marx caught my attention. It spoke about what might become possible ere the division of labor loosened and stopped from slotting persons into exclusive lines of work. Then it would become possible for any person "to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic."<sup>[1]</sup> We're sort of saying a good part of the cultural conditions necessary are changing substantially. What people have for so long contemplated as mere possibilities are fast becoming actualities. Everyone in a sense is becoming a member of the leisure class.

R 42 — In a manner of speaking. I think historically, however the leisured class was constituted, it curated the way of life for the society of which it is a part. Its members defined the options and managed the incentives that would shape the various activities that everyone in the social whole sought to pursue. That's what those comfy and complacent Greeks were doing in their city-states, and it is what leisured elites were still doing, whatever ruling ideology they may have used to legitimate it, right up to now.

V 43 — Wait! You're not saying, are you, that the first residents of *A Place to Study* will define everything for everyone else? That doesn't sound like you at all.

R 44 — I hope not. You were just saying, I thought, with the digital transformation, everyone is becoming so to speak a member of the leisure class. That's not something happening through *A Place to Study*, but something happening through the massive introduction of digital communications throughout the world, affecting everyone. Everyone is finding themselves in an unprecedented situation in which they have some significant leisure. In principle, assuming a connection to the Internet, we all have open access to the cultural resources that have served to define the leisure class historically. We're starting *A Place to Study* because the material conditions limiting leisure in the digital commons are changing deeply, rapidly, and significantly. I think the logical course of this transformation is actualizing conditions of leisure for everyone, and the chaos we have been speaking about is arising because none of us are very adept at even recognizing these powers we are using, not to speak of understanding how to use them effectively.

V 45 — OK. I sense we are beginning to form a very tentative outline or schema of what is going on. But we are going to have trouble saying it very clearly because appearances are confusing. I'm going to try to sum up what we've been saying, or perhaps better attempting to say.

Historically, roughly up to now, material conditions constraining communication have limited leisure to a relatively advantaged class, a leisure class, that has been able to make and effect choices shaping the purposes and uses of cultural resources characterizing the whole society. Now, digital communications are actualizing the material conditions in which everyone can and should, and significantly does participate in making and effecting the choices hitherto made by the leisure class, but that's happening with very little self-awareness or self-possession in the process. We are initiating *A Place to Study* as a place where anyone can study how they can best shape their purposes and uses of cultural resources within the emerging society where everyone engages in doing that. What we do we do as if it actualizes the conditions of leisure for everyone and it remains in fluid

self-revision as long as it remains evident that it falls short for some persons in actualizing those conditions. That sets a criterion for ongoing self-correction.

R 46 — I think that works for now. Let's see what it might signify for the prototyping of *A Place to Study*. We've observed that a leisure class curates a way of life, both its own and that of the society of which it is a part. Increasingly everybody is performing that function, whether or not they fully realize it.

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Topic  
New patterns  
of curation

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V 47 — Over all, I take it, this broadening of who curates the conduct of life has been leading to the cacophony of voices that we started discussing. Some might say that that shows that most people are not cut out for exercising leisure autonomously. We are objecting that the broadening that has been taking place has been leading to chaos because the cultural tools effecting the broadening of leisure have been deficient, and that's why *A Place to Study* and projects like it are important.

R 48 — Yeah. Asking us all to curate the complexities of contemporary life with a set of emojis, sets us all up for serious failure. Let's start the design and construction of *A Place to Study* with some basic principles. To curate originally means to care for, to take care of something. We are saying that all people are coming to possess the material conditions for taking care for their way of life, for exercising agency, for deciding what they, personally and as members of collectivities, can and should choose to try to do. No one, singly or together, can flat out say what is to be done, even in their most personal sphere of action. We all continually cope with circumstances about which we are largely ignorant. Whatever control we exert, personally or together with others, will be imperfect. But however imperfect, it is a function of how well we communicate, first off, first and foremost, with ourselves.

V 49 — Humph. I was going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," and suddenly, "hunh?" What's this, first off communicate with ourselves?

R 50 — It appears to me that we have no direct knowledge of our actual thinking. Yet we have great need for self-possession in the conduct of our lives. Our actual thinking takes place well below the level of consciousness and becomes evident to us as intentional, controlled behaviors take place, among them the flow of feelings, urges, drives, our conscious awareness, our uses of language, gesture, our physical movements in our immediate circumstances, and all the mediated activities we engage in our cultural surroundings. Thoughts occur to us, ideas come to us, reactions happen, speech takes place.

V 51 — I'm not sure yet that I understand your concern. A thought occurs to me and I take it from there. That seems pretty straight forward.

R 52 — Not really. You do have to take it from there, as you say. But you also have the basic problem, the one at the base of all communication: knowing the message received was the message sent. The thought that occurs to you was the message received. You don't know what your cognitive capacities sent. That's the primal ignorance at the base of everything.

V 53 — So you're saying that as all persons start to possess the conditions requisite for leisure they need to start attending to the reflexive dimension of communication, curating their cultural activities, taking care for how well their understanding of them represent the opaque actualities from which they spring. When I hear Donald Trump speaking, I get the impression he has no idea what he actually thinks, the words come out mouthed as a speech coach has trained, the sense loosely determined by some visceral emotions and a lot of hearsay.

R 54 — Too true. And it's emblematic of weaknesses to which we are all susceptible. If we look at what curators do in museums, they take care to ensure that what we understand from a work of art or from a cultural trace or artifact from a bygone time represents what we think it represents as soundly as possible.

V 55 — OK. So we all should work on the integrity of what we say, seeing to it that it represents our thought fully and accurately. The leisured components of a society are those who care for the integrity of its communications practices. Those may be mumbo jumbo, but those with leisure not only do the mumbo jumbo, but have the perspective and power to say its being done right. And I guess things get messed up for a society if the leisure class get caught up exclusively in doing the mumbo jumbo like everyone else and not making sure it is done right. And now the leisure class is becoming everyone, which now means we, everyone, is becoming responsible for both curating the communications powers and for using those powers of communication in conducting ourselves in our lifeworlds. We must maintain and perfect them sufficiently to do the job, and at the same time we must use them to get the job done. The old two-class arrangement is giving way to a two-sided challenge for all.

R 56 — Ah hah! The leisured, self-reflective side of cultural communication gives us the freedom to cultivate and put in motion the activities through which we substantively conduct our lives. But it doesn't yet seem to be working very well.

V 57 — That's true, but let's be more concrete. Through its period of growth, Facebook had as its motto, "Give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected." People thought that that was huge and more than a billion piled into it, essentially a leisured resource for self-cultivation. But relative to the fullness of human sensibility, Facebook's giving them the power to share the barbaric gesture by which the Roman crowd signaled death or life for the gravely wounded gladiator falls far short in making the world more open and connected. The resources for cultural curation in Facebook and other social media are fundamentally inadequate. Starting over, what can and should we do?

R 58 — It should start, I think, with something like the challenge Matthew Arnold laid down some 150 years ago — "culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits."<sup>[2]</sup> Working with resources commensurate with Arnold's challenge would seem closer to what would enable a leisured people to curate their prospective way of life.

V 59 — Well put. To curate a more open and connected world we all can and should join to promote the integrity and adequacy of our communicative capacities, extending achieved capacities for self-possession and self-expression, without pretending to know what those are in their fulness, but striving continuously to disclose and improve them to the best of our abilities. With respect to our humanity, we are all like the athlete who does not know how fast he can go but repeatedly tries to run a better race.

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1. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a4>), Part 1, A, 4 "Private Property and Communism."

2. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (1869), Preface, ¶3

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# Disclosing the commons

Please note: What follows contains draft content that will be significantly revised.

I'm Robbie. I'll begin with a few words on why I'm starting *A Place to Study*, which provides free, comprehensive resources to persons seeking self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons.

Everyone *has been educated* in a worldwide system of formal instruction—some to succeed, others to fail. Helping more to succeed in the system and fewer to fail is important, but not the aim in creating *A Place to Study*.

*What can we and should we do when the system itself stops succeeding and starts to fail?*

And it is not only the global system of educational institutions that have begun to fail.

- Our economic system has chugged out of control. It over-produces, distributes its product inefficiently and unjustly, and flouts bi-products that foul and destabilize the habitat.
- Our political system, never too steady, abandons the task of governing the civic whole and rips itself apart through blind battling for power, heedless of its use.
- Our communications systems rush straightway to transform the affordances and constraints that determine who says what to whom for what reasons and with what effects—the resulting babel passes as words to make us great again.

Education for success in failing systems is not a wise choice. What is the wise choice? That's the question we can and should examine. To make a place for that is why I've begun *A Place to Study*.

It offers no solutions, no packages, no planned and vetted paths. It offers each a place to reflect, to inquire, to think, and to study as each sees fit in the company of others with resources that suit the task.

*A Place to Study* exists as a starting point for any person trying to make wise educational choices while living and working in failing civic systems—instructional, economic, political, and cultural. That requires significant effort on unconventional possibilities exerted decisively despite substantial self-doubt.

As a worksite for that effort, *A Place to Study* does not offer quick gratification, no going viral. You enter it as if you are going alone to a large, complex city where the language and texture of life differs from home. Orient yourself to both the spirit and the particulars of the place.

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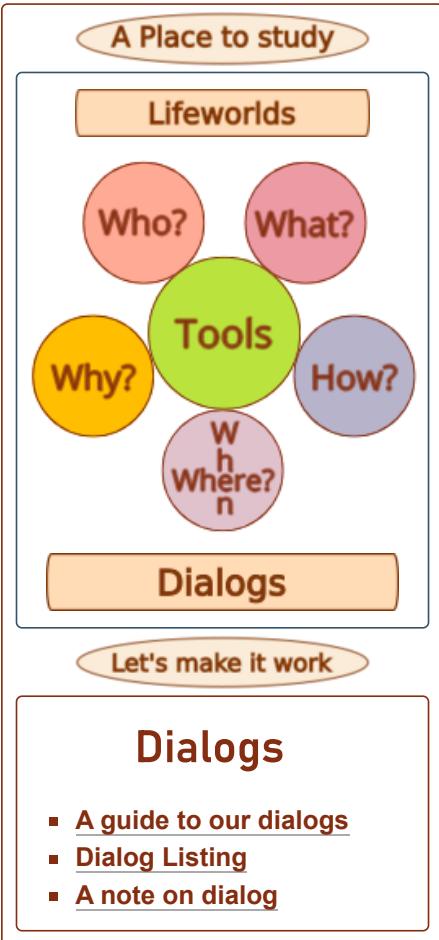
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# Learn liberally

Wherein V and R have a short dialogue on the imperative to learn liberally, commanding it as the ancients did as learning in a manner worthy of a free person.

## V 1 — Learn liberally?

R 2 — Yes, as a free, autonomous person, using your own judgment, making your own choices, thinking for yourself in the company of others.

## V 3 — What company?

R 4 — What else but the company of others who also learn liberally, looking on their lives and lifeworld from within, speaking as they see fit? We learn liberally in a community of peers, all of whom learn liberally in interaction with one another.

## V 5 — Where do I find such company?

R 6 — Don't look for it ready-made. The admissions office won't recruit it. You learn liberally by learning liberally, making choices, using your judgment, selecting a company of peers — "my exemplars who learn liberally" — and interacting with them autonomously, thinking for yourself, with them, in your unique lifeworld.

## V 7 — How should I select and interact with these peers?

R 8 — That's what we try here to figure out, by(?) — that's right — by learning liberally, by working together to disclose our respective answers to these questions.

## V 9 — Wait! Aren't we spinning in circles!

File:A-Weaver's-Atelier-350.png

R 10 — Indeed, like a wheel. To move, it begins to turn, and keeps turning, round and round. Begin to turn. Think of that old cliché, "learn by doing." How can it start? Not with a lesson learned, but with an act, a doing. To learn by doing one must do, then one may learn. To start to learn liberally, one must learn liberally, act freely, make choices, use judgment, risk consequences, turn a wheel and set things in motion.

## V 11 — How might I start?

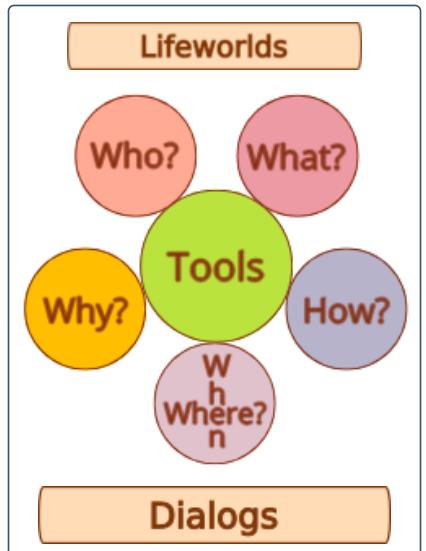
R 12 — In many ways — the *how* is in the starting. Try picking for yourself an exemplar of learning liberally — someone who might, in your judgment, disclose what human autonomy, making choices, using judgment, thinking for oneself, entails. Make it several. Make them persons you can get close to and carry with you yet hold in mind with a certain disinterest, exemplars with a full, tangible work accessible to you, moving work — a film, painting, book, or activity with which you can commune throughout your effort to learn liberally. Ask yourself. Possess the question as yours to answer and you will have started to learn liberally.

## V 13 — I'm not sure what you mean. I might pick some people, but I'm not sure each would count "as an exemplar of learning liberally."

R 14 — Ah! You miss the point. No one comes certified as an exemplar of learning liberally, but anyone you pick might or might not do so as you started to ask yourself whether and how they go about their learning. In your judgment, do they exemplify using their autonomous judgment in the process or do they rely passively on others with respect to the purpose and substance of their learning, their self-formation? You can start asserting your autonomy vis-à-vis another's example.

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## A Place to study



## Dialogs

## Let's make it work

## Dialogs

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V 15 — OK. So I will try not to assume that *others are exemplars*, but rather to examine whether and why I will take someone as an exemplar of my liberal learning.

R 16 — Do you want a companion in your search for companions? Try Friedrich Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*<sup>[1]</sup> and think liberally about what your choice might aim at, not to copy Nietzsche's choice, but to commune with you as you choose reflectively your own exemplars. Make the question your own — not "can I have an example?", but "is this the example I can and should use?" Remember the key: to learn liberally, begin. Begin. Begin.

V 17 — *Well, should I just leap in? Will anyone or anything do?*

As the Platonic daughter of Necessity said

Virtue is without master [a teacher]; each shall have more or less of her according as he honors or dishonors her. The responsibility is his who chooses.<sup>[2]</sup>

R 18 — Choosing must have a start, arbitrary and surprising, but completing your choice of exemplars won't be easy — different possibilities will beckon and many deserve consideration. And each of us has multiple sides and interests — your exemplar may prove to be several, and as the vicissitudes of life unfold, you can and should change them. Nor will hagiography help — exemplarity derives, not from idealized virtue, but from what the beholder extracts from telling examples, good, bad, and indifferent.

Rabelais' Gargantua  
looks upon the Abbé of Thélème

cent

In their Rule there was but this clause: *Do what thou wilt*, because ... persons who are free, well-born, well-bred, conversant in honest company, have by nature an instinct and spur, which always prompts them to virtuous actions and withdraws them from vice; and this they style honour.<sup>[3]</sup>

V 19 — *OK. As I start to learn liberally, what can and should I do then?*

R 20 — Use your judgment. Perhaps having made our choices, recognizing that we are the ones responsible for them, we can and should explain our choices to ourselves and others. Why do you find this person and her work exemplary in a quest to learn liberally? Can you help others consider their choices as possible exemplars for them in turn? What's accessible, difficult, especially valuable, engaging, obscure, inspiring, tricky, perhaps even dangerous in communing with them? By explaining your choices, you test their exemplarity for yourself and exercise the liberality of your own learning. As many of us do that, we can build up from our responses, not a canon, not a pantheon, but a growing, diverse sampler of potential companions, informing responsible choices that others may make in starting to learn liberally.

V 21 — *Sounds good. I guess I'm ready to start.*

R 22 — Then let's do it and start filling the digital commons with a rich sampling of Recent voices on liberal learning. It's a start — *a start*. We can and should volunteer other starts as well, ones that in the judgment of others suits them better — better to set them in motion to learn liberally.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, in Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Daniel Breazeale, ed., & R. J. Hollingdale, trans., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 125-194.
2. Plato, *Republic* 617e (R. E. Allen, trans.)
3. Illustration by Gustave Doré from François Rabelais (1494?-1553), *Oeuvres de Rabelais* (Texte collationné sur les éditions originales avec une vie de l'auteur, des notes et un glossaire par Louis Moland. Illustrations de Gustave Doré, 2 vols., Paris: Garnier Frères, 1873). Vol. 1 Plate between 166 & 167. Get from Gallica: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1044326s?rk=21459;2>. Text, slightly revised from Rabelais: *The Five Books and Minor Writings*, w. F. Smith, trans., (2 vols., London: Scribners, 1893), Vol. 1, p. 191. Consult at Hathi Trust: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015014639929;view=1up;seq=7>.

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# Study deeply

Wherein V and R discuss an idea of humanistic education as a prolonged encounter through a person changes herself.

## V 1 — Can I go to school, college, or some special place to learn liberally?

R 2 — Many curricula claim the liberal arts, but to learn liberally there is only one — your *curriculum vitae* in its original sense, the course of your life. As free, autonomous persons, making our own choices, using our own judgment, thinking for ourselves in the company of others, we can and should learn liberally throughout our lives, wherever and whenever we can.

## V 3 — OK, but then—wherever and whenever—what do I aim at as I learn liberally?

R 4 — Here's a clue from someone who learned liberally: "Plato's central importance for a humanistic education — and 'humanistic education' is really tautological — is due to the fact that a prolonged encounter with Plato changes a man."<sup>[1]</sup> You might take Plato to be the clue, but that works for only a few. "A *prolonged encounter*" gives us the better clue, for it works for most everyone. As one learns liberally, one aims at a *prolonged encounter*, one that *changes a person*.

## V 5 — Prolonging encounters isn't so hard, but which will change me, and how?

R 6 — Learn that liberally! The verb, "to entertain," comes from French, (*entre* = "between" plus *tenir* = "to hold, keep, or grasp"), including among its senses as the word came into English, "to keep (a person, group, etc.) in a certain state or condition". Prolonged encounters *do not entertain*, for they are more formative. Our lives fill with encounters. We let many hold us casually between this and that, entertaining us; but we also use our judgment and choose to prolong others, not in a steady state, but in a sequence of returns, in which we uncover new possibilities for us that cumulatively mark a significant change in our course of life. With warped judgment, these recurrent encounters can spell trouble and we learn illiberally, self-destructively. With sound judgment, the cumulative change brings a welcome measure of fulfillment.

## V 7 — How does one avoid warped judgment and strengthen firm judgment?

R 8 — Here's where *study* comes in, the examined life. Prolonged encounters consist in many repetitions, which we can easily sustain mindlessly, unconscious habits with which we drift according to the currents of *fortuna*. Study attends sharply to what happens in the sequence of repetitions, perceiving the opening and closing of possibilities, testing, trying, interpreting, understanding, acting and reacting. "Warped judgment" or "sound judgment" are not things out there that one avoids or envelops; they are in us, internal organs integral to the lives we form for ourselves. We avoid warping our judgment and succeed in firming our judgment by living attentively, studiously, thoughtfully, examining our courses of action with as much forethought as we can muster.

## V 9 — Wait, what you say here about living seems to require a lot of leisure, all that time to be attentive, thoughtful, and on — time most of us don't have and can't afford.

R 10 — Every skill and art involves gradations of excellence and complexities of purpose, which repay close examination. Why did Socrates, himself a stonemason, converse with craftsmen as much as the leisured well-to-do? The wise philosopher and the wise shoemaker will interact more constructively than either can with the rich fool. Read the daily news! It is not work and play

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### A Place to study

#### Lifeworlds



#### Dialogs

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now, and then be attentive, studious, and thoughtful, examining why one did what one did yesterday. Examining life takes place through a quality of awareness with which one lives the life.

**V 11 — OK, but doesn't exercising some forms of awareness require more leisure than others?**

R 12 — Perhaps, but we cannot be sure. The boorish aesthete and ignorant leader, and many other knaves and fools, recur in all walks and strata. Life puts to us many questions and some may be more difficult to examine well than others are. These may evoke the most perplexity and disagreement and thus around them the efforts to examine them over many generations have accreted numerous layers and aspects. Grasping all that seems to require a lot of leisure. Yet those lived questions arise from the life that each person lives and it is not clear that great insight into these lived questions requires the extraordinary leisure needed to master all the accretions. Was not Jesus an ordinary carpenter?

**V 13 — What good then comes from thorough study of these difficult aspects of life?**

R 14 — When people devote themselves to these questions for purposes extrinsic to them it may serve little good and possibly much harm. But insofar as the questions are real questions in the lives we lead, questions that we live — attending to, choosing between, judging with, acting on — we need to examine them as best we can. Given the complexity of the record, it is a fair bet that as we act, each of us will have to admit, "I can't be sure." But each of us might also want to reduce the degree of uncertainty we feel as best we can. It is a kind of privilege to do that at length, but no right of gate keeping comes with that privilege, for each person lives the questions and must take responsibility for the answers she acts out. Hence, we present the Heritage of Study on these matters and invite all to engage in it as deeply as they can and should, taking account of their unique circumstances in which each conducts their lives.

<https://www.aplacetostudy.com/pictures/Bees-Pillage-the-Flowers.png>

Montaigne on the formation of judgment

Truth and reason are common to everyone and are no more his who spoke them first than his who speaks them later. It is no more according to Plato than according to me since both he and I equally see and understand it in the same manner. Bees pillage the flowers here and there, but they then make honey of them which is all their own; it is no longer thyme and marjoram; so the fragments borrowed from others he will transform and blend together to make a work that shall be absolutely his own; that is to say, his judgment. His education, labor, and study aim only at forming that.<sup>[2]</sup>

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2. Montaigne, "Of the Education of Children," in Montaigne, *Selected Essays* Cotton-Hazlitt, trans. revised by Blanchard Bates, New York: The Modern

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# Think formatively

Wherein V and R explore how a person's capacities and possibilities are unknown to herself and to others until she discloses them through her work of self-formation.

## V 1 — What's new here?

R 2 — As you imply, the imperative "think formatively" overlaps with "study deeply," and "learn liberally." All five activities are of a piece; they aren't a sequence and we should grasp them all together. So let's ask, *What's different here?* Generally, allowing for many exceptions, we *study* matters that are more or less given and complete, seeking to grasp and understand them. In contrast, we *think* things that are more in process, ideas that are taking shape. Instead of interpreting the work of others, here we advance our own, developing our ongoing thinking. In thinking we are progressively disclosing our thought rather than interpreting something finished.

## V 3 — I get that, but why "Think formatively?"

R 4 — Excellent! That's important to ask. Human action is complicated and usually has immediate instrumental consequences as well as longer term formative ones. Take a tiny instance, a teacher asks a question and some kids squirm, hands raised, trying to look the teacher in the eye to catch her attention, others look down, getting still and small. All that body language has to do with the instrumental side, getting called on or avoiding it, knowing the answer or not.

## V 5 — That sounds like elementary school. Isn't it all pretty instrumental, imparting basic skills?

R 6 — Maybe, but imagine the teacher calls on Cindy, believing that she probably knows the response but is frozen as small as can be because she is shy, even though smart. The teacher thinks Cindy might flourish if drawn out. And formative consequences may indeed follow: if the teacher is wrong and Cindy is further mortified, her shyness gets reinforced; if the teacher is right, Cindy may indeed gain some confidence in herself and overcome her shyness. But really, right or wrong, Cindy might respond in many different ways. She might answer correctly but feel put out at the intrusion into her inner life, or she might feel the teacher tried spitefully for some reason to mortify her and decide to tune that teacher out, or....

## V 7 — Would Cindy have an inner life at 9 or 10?

R 8 — The kids are making choices for reasons, some clamoring to answer, others holding back. At every age, people choose in a variety of ways and have complex responses in every situation beyond the immediate issue, right or wrong. They make important choices for and about themselves through these complex responses. "Think formatively" suggests that persons, in the course of coping with immediate circumstances across their span of age and circumstance, consider that what they are doing and how they are doing it will shape and form their human capacities .

## V 9 — I'll grant a distinction between the immediate and longer term, which may be between instrumental and formative, more or less. But isn't all of education about the formation of human capacities? Will it work? and Is it good for me? are two different questions applying to most everything we do. Do we need this workplace to think formatively?

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R 10 — Perhaps we don't. But let's go back to the teacher and shy Cindy. In calling on Cindy, the teacher takes a risk in the face of numerous uncertainties. Most educational research and thinking about instructional practice concentrates on the pros and cons of curricular objectives and teachers' actions to attain them: Was the teacher doing the right thing in calling on Cindy OK for ? Such questions really concentrate on the instrumental activities of instruction, which may have good or bad long-term formative consequences for Cindy — we rarely know.

V 11 — Well, I sort of follow, but I don't see where you are going.

R 12 — I want to ask whether the pedagogical problem, the formative problem, is really a problem the teacher faces. Might it be Cindy's problem, even when she is a little kid?

V 13 — How so?

R 14 — Laying responsibility on the teacher requires her to guess a lot about Cindy and to make some predictions about her reaction, which may or may not be on the mark, in this case, a mark centering on Cindy's shyness and its possible long-term influence on her capacities. Let's try to think formatively with Cindy and draw her out a little about why she feels shy. Why has she formed that capability, a strategy of making small and withdrawal, in dealing with others?

V 15 — But will Cindy know? And is it fair to expect her to?

R 16 — In drawing someone out about something, should we think they will know all about it? I don't think so. In conversing with someone about thoughts and feelings, we do not anticipate an authoritative transmission of tested knowledge. Can and should we expect Cindy to converse about how she thinks and feels, our exposing in turn how we think and feel too? To be sure, it's difficult. She may be thoughtfully introverted with lots of reasons for not clamoring for the teacher's attention, or she may be shy because she feels inadequate, a lack of self confidence, lots of different things, or who knows what. It may be hard to get her to open up, and for the teacher to interact with Cindy, each revealing their own inner feelings. But a little one-on-one between the two of them might have value, not to change Cindy in some predetermined way, but to encourage her to think about her intentions and their complexity, and the teacher to do so too, for both to see things as many-sided possibilities. It's not a matter of knowing. The teacher can help the student recognize possibilities, and vice versa.

V 17 — Hmm. Most teachers would say that their job isn't to enter into such conversations and they haven't been trained to do so. If anyone, parents should do it! Or, if things are bad, perhaps a shrink.

R 18 — You're right, but that is precisely the point. Yes, parents should do it, but most of them are no more prepared for it than teachers are. And the shrink will see the situation as an instrumental call to control the problematic behavior. And why aren't teachers ready to enter into such conversation? I think it's because everyone — parents, teachers, the public — sees "education" simply to mean formal instruction, an instrumental service, not a formative interaction between a person, the pupil or whomever, and her circumstances, which include teachers, the school and its program, and ever so much more. But really, when we see education narrow, instrumental way, it isn't the real thing; it's training, not education. Education comes about cumulatively and continuously as each person manages her self-formation in interaction with others through the course of her life.

V 19 — Isn't doing that a big burden to put on kids?

**R 20 — We're not putting it on them. The burden is there in their lives, in the life of each person. That's life, as Sinatra sang. We're recognizing that the burden is there. The kids, any one of us, may not have the right words — an infant not yet any words! — but recognizing what they see and feel and finding ways to serve as sounding boards for their felt questions about themselves and their possibilities can be very important. We have a huge opportunity to redefine how we think about education by beginning with the proposition that people at all ages, even the very young, are aware of their formative dilemmas and do make choices about them and would benefit, not from instruction about them, but the opportunity to discuss them with willing interlocutors as a way of better informing, of forming their choices within.**

**V 21 — So the imperative — "Think formatively!" — encourages us to think about ways to interact with persons engaged in their self-formation, helping them perceive and understand possibilities and make sound formative choices in the course of their lives.**

**R 22 — Yes. Who are the educators? And who do they educate? And how do they do it? Those are the questions we ask ourselves here.**

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# Educate tactfully

Wherein V and R recognize that education involves ongoing interaction between a person and her world, often other persons exerting strong influence, but that influence will best bear fruit as the recipient welcomes it into her inner life, encouraged by the tact and nuance of the interaction.

V 1 — I thought I was catching on, turning things inside out with everyone a student and everyone continuously making decisions for themselves. But the injunction, "Educate tactfully," seems to put the teacher back in charge.

R 2 — Ha! Yes and no! At its root, *educate* means *to draw out*, not as one pulls thread out from a spool, but as persons interactively draw each other out in the course of conversation. In this sense, we might restate the injunction, *educate tactfully* simply to say *converse tactfully*. Who's in charge? Each person is ultimately in charge of taking what she will for herself from the interaction, both teacher and student are in charge of themselves. In conversing, both teacher and student are drawing themselves out through the interaction and will do so best by doing it tactfully, a difficult art.<sup>[1]</sup> Among many other things pedagogical, teachers educate themselves in conversing with their students and students educate themselves in conversing with their teachers.

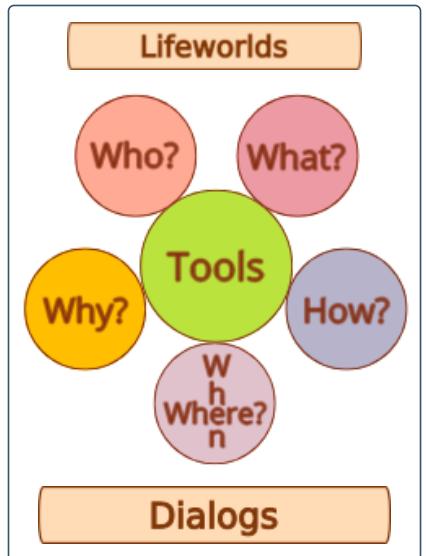
V 3 — Come on. How's that to happen in most situations that are highly conventional, stereotypical, especially in formal education with everyone acting out well scripted behaviors?

R 4 — Well, even in highly scripted interactions, significant interstices can arise — a pause, a faint smile or raised eyebrow, and opportunities to let things pass unnoticed or lightly abetted, the very stuff of tact Michel de Montaigne celebrated it when he recalled his own strict training at the Collège de Guienne. But you are right, the modern world cues behavior at every opportunity. Are laugh tracks going out of style or are they becoming obsolete, audiences well primed without them? Yet I think tactful educating need not depend on interstitial time and space.

V 5 — How's that? With so much scripted behavior, what's left?

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## Montaigne's tactful tutor

I happened by remarkable good fortune to come in contact with a tutor who was an understanding man, who knew enough to connive cleverly at this frivolity of mine and others like it. For by this means I went right through Virgil's *Aeneid*, and then Terence, and then Plautus, and some Italian comedies, always lured on by the pleasantness of the subject. If he had been foolish enough to break me of this habit, I think I should have got nothing out of school but a hatred of books, as do nearly all of our noblemen. He went about it cleverly. Pretending to see nothing, he whetted my appetite, letting me gorge myself with these books only in secret, and gently keeping me at my work on the regular studies.<sup>[2]</sup>

R 6 — Well, to start with an example, I like to drive and most of the time I'm outwardly dealing with highly scripted behaviors — my own and those of other drivers. But that occupies only a small part of the mind and it leaves a lot of other space open. Many people occupy it by listening to recordings or conversing with a passenger. I do that sometimes, of course, but I often like to turn inward and let my interior discourse flow. Outward behaviors at times intrude — traffic, another driver going off script. That may halt or turn the flow of inner life this way or that for a bit, but the inner life keeps on going and has

meaning, often for formative matters. Now, more generally, I think as outward behavior becomes more and more scripted, routinized, the inner life potentially expands and gains import. In the current ethos, we unnecessarily deprecate and ignore the inner life, sticking laugh tracks everywhere — "Just do it! Don't think." We can and should do just the opposite. To me "Educate tactfully" commands us to take the inner life seriously, our own and that of other persons.

V 7 — I guess, then, in urging ourselves to educate tactfully, we will be working to cultivate The Inner Life, Its Care and Significance.

R 8 — Right on — let's try it.

1. With a "ready and delicate sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others, so as to avoid giving offence, or win good will; skill or judgement in dealing with men or negotiating difficult or delicate situations; the faculty of saying or doing the right thing at the right time." *OED online, "Tact, n. 2. (<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/196957#eid19135086>)"*
2. Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Education of Children," in *The Complete Works* (Donald M. Frame, trans., New York: Knopf, Everyman's Library, 2003) p.158.

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# Value sprezzatura

Wherein V and R discuss how the elitist traditions of liberal learning are becoming increasingly accessible to everyone.

V 1 — What's going on? Isn't *sprezzatura* something for trendy wannabes?<sup>[1]</sup>

R 2 — Ouch! People too easily co-opt the term. But even so, it can still be of value and will help make an essential point.

V 3 — OK, let's hear it.

R 4 — We are told that some 500 years ago an Italian count defined *sprezzatura* while discussing how men born to noble families could acquire the qualities that served powerful courtiers, men of influence in the political and cultural life of the competing city-states. Listen while I read it.

I have found quite a universal rule which in this matter [acquiring the skills of the courtier] seems to me valid above all other, and in all human affairs whether in word or deed: and that is to avoid affectation in every way possible as though it were some rough and dangerous reef; and (to pronounce a new word perhaps) to practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura* [nonchalance], so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it.<sup>[2]</sup>

V 5 — Hasn't Hollywood now emblazoned its heroes in *sprezzatura* to the point of absurdity? — Double-O Sevens who know every cue, master every move, with an apt word in every situation, all without a sweat.

R 6 — Well, not only Hollywood. All sorts try. But they forget the injunction, "to avoid affectation." James Bond oozes affectation in his caricature of *sprezzatura*. That's what makes him popular.

V 7 — Explain that a bit. I see the caricature, but how does that make him popular?

R 8 — People realize, perhaps only unconsciously, that *grace*, *sprezzatura*, the *courtier* as a type, represented the virtues of the highborn in an aristocratic world. *The Book of the Courtier* noted that natural nobility emerged occasionally in lowborn persons, but dismissed the possibility of their making it as courtiers. The idea of the courtier was much too elitist for the democratic sensibility. We require it caricatured as something that doesn't need to be taken seriously as an option for ourselves. Male and female respond to the caricature as a fantasy wish-fulfillment, a great path to popularity.

V 9 — OK, but why are we then saying "Value *sprezzatura*?"

R 10 — Well, let's ask why noble birth was so essential for anyone wanting to be a courtier? People then recognized that natural ability occurred throughout the population, but becoming a courtier was unthinkable without noble birth. What skills did the courtier need and how would he get them to the point of seeming to have them effortlessly? Why was noble birth essential?

V 11 — You know, I haven't read the book, but I've watched that series, *The Borgias*.<sup>[3]</sup> Judging from it, the skills were pretty complicated. They were fighters, while riding horses and on foot, using swords, pikes, crossbows, some early cannons and guns; and they were counselors, helping to govern city-states with pretty complicated politics and trade, and they became churchmen sometimes and dealt with the Church, and with crowds, and not a few wingnuts; they considered statecraft and law and negotiated with a confusion of friends and enemies, and they helped commission paintings and build buildings, aesthetic questions, and were part of the court attending to the ladies and ceremonies there, dancing and possibly playing

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musical instruments, and the ladies now and then might cavort downscale, but they expected to live upscale, participating themselves in decisive ways as well. It was all high risk, ruthless, and with no cushion of affirmative action.

R 12 — Right, you might find Burckhardt a better source, but that's OK<sup>[4]</sup>. How would one become proficient and at ease in all this, by the age of 20 or so?

V 13 — I get it. Being born into and growing up in a family in which all these things were the stuff of daily life would be a decisive advantage. But I still don't get why *sprezzatura* should be valued now in our concern for liberal learning.

R 14 — It's actually quite simple. Like the life of the courtier, historically liberal learning has been very elitist. It's been hard to get, expensive, best suited to the well-to-do who don't have to worry as much about preparing for economic success. That was life, but why was that the case?

V 15 — It was because, as you say, acquiring liberal learning was a lot like acquiring the skills of the courtier — it was a lot easier if you were born into circumstances where the tools for liberal learning were ready at hand.

R 16 — Exactly, a well-stocked library, learned elders, tutors and travel, the chance to practice early with the sense that doing so was simply natural — *comme il faut*, as it should be — all these were almost preconditions of the possibility. And now, we've got to ask, What's happening with the Internet and what we are intending to do on it? What happens if we do a good job putting together in the digital commons, an open environment, the *best that's been thought and said* available freely for persons — any one, any where, any time? Aren't we opening the requisite material conditions to people who want to learn liberally, study deeply, think formatively, and educate tactfully?

V 17 — Ah ha! Billions of people connect to the Internet and the circumstances for acquiring liberal learning can perhaps be ready at hand for those of them who wish to do so, whatever the accidents of their birth. It would become a different ball game.

R 18 — Yes! We are far from being able to play it yet. But what we see now is just the beginning and in working on our imperatives we should value *sprezzatura*. We should aim to present the tools for acquiring liberal learning with a scope and depth, such that anyone who wishes to do so can accomplish it with *sprezzatura* and without affectation.

1. For the trendy *reductio ad absurdum*: "Sprezzatura – What It is, DOs and DON'Ts" by Christopher Lee, *Gentleman's Gazette* (March 12, 2018),  
<https://www.gentlemansgazette.com/sprezzatura-dos-and-donts/>.
2. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (Charles S. Singleton, trans., New York: W. W. Norton, 2002) p. 32.
3. *The Borgias*, Starring Jeremy Irons, Joanne Whalley, Francois Arnaud. (Amazon Prime ([https://www.amazon.com/The-Poisoned-Chalice/dp/B006L4I04W/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?crid=11RUFM8AIJZDV&keywords=the+borgias+complete+series&qid=1568835589&s=instant-video&sprefix=the+borgias%2Caps%2C132&sr=1-3.](https://www.amazon.com/The-Poisoned-Chalice/dp/B006L4I04W/ref=sr_1_3?crid=11RUFM8AIJZDV&keywords=the+borgias+complete+series&qid=1568835589&s=instant-video&sprefix=the+borgias%2Caps%2C132&sr=1-3.).)
4. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (Middlemore. trans.)

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V 1 — Excuse me. I hope you won't find it offensive if I ask a delicate question.

R 2 — I doubt that I would. Whatever you want to ask, go ahead, ask it.

V 3 — You've taken quite some trouble with *A Place to Study* and I don't see really what your purpose is. Facebook says Hallmarkish things about its purpose, but we all know it serves to sell ads and information about its users so its employees and owners make lots of money. Other so-called *free* sites do that too. You don't have ads or a pay wall or even a pro version we can bump up to for a price. And you don't appear to be the digital façade furthering the purposes of some large organization

— academic, religious, philanthropic, or governmental. What is the purpose behind *A Place to Study*?

R 4 — Hmm. Will I satisfy your curiosity if I say simply that the purpose behind *A Place to Study* is to construct and use a place to study to disclose the commons by advancing liberal learning and self-formation?

V 5 — Not really. There's always some other angle. What is it?

R 6 — Right, and sometimes even an angel! OK. Let's look behind *A Place to Study*, but it may take a bit and I'll have to ask you some questions. Let me start asking, what's the tell?

V 7 — What's the tell? I'm not understanding your question.

R 8 — It's common for us to always think there is something behind something, but if it isn't apparent, we usually don't ask about it unless something specific triggers the question. A good bluff passes unnoticed unless the bluffer does something that tells others that maybe he's bluffing — that trigger is "the tell." What triggers your question?

V 9 — Well, it isn't very subtle here. Look at what you say about what you aim to do. Are they commands? More likely exhortations. "Learn liberally, Study deeply, Think ... Educate ... Value...." There's a purpose at work here! You can't miss it! Learn, study, think, educate, value — what is all that for?

R 10 — Great question! But need those activities have ulterior purposes? Can't we do them simply for their own sake?

V 11 — Maybe, but it seems to me that built into the idea of serving a purpose is the understanding that the purpose is *for something*. When I hear, "for its own sake," something in me goes, "Oh, really?" That phrase, itself, becomes a tell.

R 12 — OK. It's good to push us on this. Perhaps we can start this way. Do you remember as a kid seeing a grown-up do something and asking them why?

V 13 — Yeah. Sometimes the answers were gobbledegook, words I couldn't understand. Sometimes I'd understand the words, but not the why, so I'd ask the why again—

    Mom, why'd you give the money back?

    Because, V, it's the right thing to do.

    But Mom. Why's that the right thing to do?

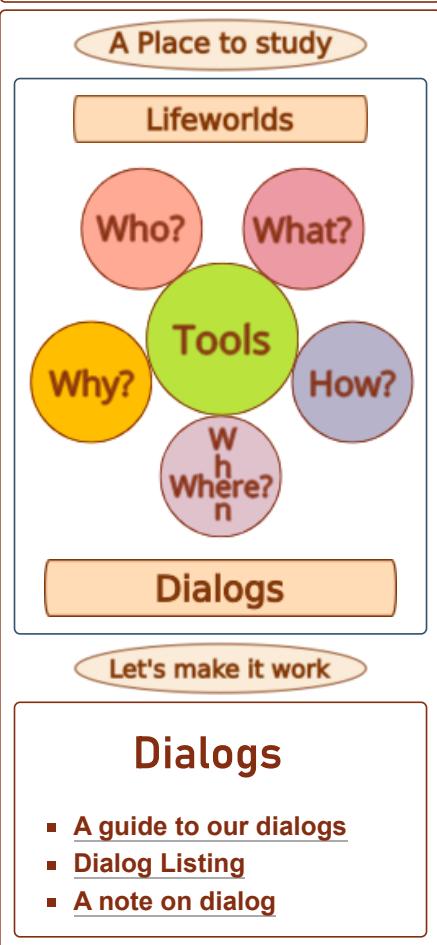
    Well, V. Because. . . . Just because.

The exchange might go on through more cycles, but it and others end in a "Just because."

R 14 — Do you remember how you felt about the "Just because"?

V 15 — Well, I think sometimes I felt that mom was getting impatient and I better not push it further, or at least, when the kid next door quizzes me about why I like practicing scales on my sax, I feel that impatience. After a couple rounds I just say,

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'I want to get better.' She says, 'Why?' I just say, 'Because . . . , ' tailing off in uncertainty more than impatience.

R 16 — Do you have any sense what the kid is thinking then?

V 17 — Umm, she seems pretty uncertain too, sort of that *guess-I'll-have-to-wait-and-see* attitude, sort of like mine. There's a kind of ambivalence — it could go on, but it also stops. I can think of many mundane reasons why I want to get better — to get good enough to play in a jazz group, possibly to make a little money while having fun with friends — lots of reasons. But then — it's a bit strange — sometimes when I'm just doing scales, I like doing it, kind of loosing myself exploring little nuances, much like I feel when I'm lost in really making music, fully absorbed in it.

R 18 — Interesting. We seem to have differentiated two modes of thinking about why we do things, one in which we look at ends in view, all the different things that doing something might lead to, and the other pointing to the immediate fulfillment we may feel through doing what we are doing. In one, we are doing what we're doing for some external purpose that we try to bring about by what we are doing, and in the other the purpose of what we're doing seems to be in doing what we're doing, and we describe that as doing it for its own sake.

V 19 — Yeah, but there's still the problem of *the tell*. A lot of stuff out there seems to be there for its own sake, but if you ask *Why?* hard enough, it doesn't end in a *Just because*, but in some slick scheme to sell stuff and commodify our hopes and ideals. I'm getting cynical on principle.

R 20 — Get skeptical, not cynical. Acting for a purpose and acting for its own sake are not mutually exclusive. They are actually quite different reasons for acting, ones which we can possibly combine constructively.

V 21 — That's right, exemplified by what I said about practicing my scales. I do it in order to get good enough to play professionally and it helps a lot that I can sometimes lose myself in it, doing it for its own sake. So what are we objecting to, then, when we object to commodification?

R 22 — It's not an either-or, categorical problem, but a conditional one; like most of life, a matter of striking the right balance.

V 23 — OK, but that doesn't help much. What's the right balance and how do we strike it? I began saying I had a delicate question. You're not creating *A Place to Study* simply for its own sake. You're doing it partly for something and partly for its own sake, and I want to understand the mixture. Frankly, superficially, it seems out of balance to me.

R 24 — How so?

V 25 — I don't understand your decision to forego all the incentives associated with formal education in developing *A Place to Study*. Look at all the resources consumed through the educational system motivated by many-sided, complex incentives. What you propose must either be disastrously unrealistic or a thorough deception!

R 26 — You speak of *our decision* to forego the incentives. It is "our decision" only with reference to a very large, long-lasting historical collectivity which has grown up over millennia as an effort to use the energies of human leisure — leisure being the capacity to act autonomously for self-set goals — for the sake of developing and perfecting human capacities.

V 27 — Oh, that's right, "school" came from the ancient Greek for "leisure," that time when men and boys who would join together outside the workplaces to consider things as they pleased. But still, you have to deal with the question of incentives. In ancient Greece some men had leisure thanks to a slave economy.

R 28 — You're right, but slavery did not create leisure in the ancient world. It conditioned who had it and who didn't. Even in extreme conditions of subsistence, leisure exists as an aspect of human life. Anthropologists find it everywhere, conditioned in different ways. In developing *A Place to Study*, we want to create alternative conditions for leisure in contemporary life. We think there is a whole lot wrong and missing in the way we currently condition leisure in both public and private life.

V 29 — Let's go slowly. I want to understand the alternative you envision, but there is still this delicate question and I'll put it as bluntly as I can, not to be nasty, but to better understand. When you start talking about creating alternative conditions in contemporary life, I need to cross a big threshold of disbelief before I can consider your alternative thoughtfully. Face it — you're a little old man, perhaps with a few friends and some scanty material resources, proposing to forego all the established incentives to create alternative conditions for leisure in contemporary life. Let's get real!

R 30 — Sure, as a policy proposition, it is a loser of pathetic and comical proportions. But I'm not sure that the makers of policy propositions are very good at initiating historical changes. Historical change is not causal, a series of changes effected by discrete causes. It is ecological, transformations in patterns in the interactions of living organisms in and with their environments. What's going on with *A Place to Study* isn't a little old man cobbling together another website. We're just acting within a much bigger ecological change, and we are by no means in the vanguard of those acting within it.

V 31 — I'm listening. What's going on in this ecological change?

R 32 — Well, from inside ecological change, and all of us are inside it, we have no ground from which to chart precisely and fully how interrelationships are changing. Consequently, whatever we say about it will be a partial, subjective view. But we need nevertheless to determine a course of action as best we can from such perspectives.

V 33 — Just make it simple and direct. I'm trying to understand, not quibble.

R 34 — OK. The key thing introduced into the interaction patterns of human interrelations is not our particular initiative, but digital systems of communication in general. *A Place to Study* is just one of many efforts instantiating the new possibilities arising with those systems.

V 35 — What does that do to alter the conditions of leisure?

R 36 — It radically alters the material conditions, the constraints in time and space limiting social interaction, particularly leisured interaction.

V 37 — Explain that some, especially the part about "particularly leisured interaction."

R 38 — Well the great advances of modernity — roughly 1500 to 2000 — brought people together in cities, factories, offices, schools and had them work with high degrees of synchronization with powerful tools on materials, vastly increasing capacities for production. These affected the practices of work more significantly than those of leisure. Even the "school" lost its leisured character and became a vast mandarin system preparing personnel for the many offices of industrial states.

V 39 — So what's happening through the spread of digital technologies over the past 50 years or so? Social media 2.0? I don't see mandarin schooling contracting or mass leisure blossoming.

R 40 — Umm. Right, mass schooling is still growing. Mass leisure, too, has billowed as part of the consumption system that's become necessary to maintain demand for production. Constraining leisure to support consumption

corrupts it, however.

**V 41 — OK, a lot of people are consuming a lot of entertainment and online action. Me too, but without a great sense of fulfillment. Tell me more about what you see as problematic in it.**

**R 42 —** Here we need some imagination with "Oh? Really?" at the ready. Take Facebook. "We build technologies that help people connect with friends and family, find communities, and grow businesses." "Oh? Really?" Or do they do that for the purpose of selling advertising and opportunities to influence opinion in order to enrich their employees and stockholders.

**V 43 — Yeah. Facebook presents itself as a place where people can to act for its own sake. But we've said that we can do things for their own sake and for explicit purposes at the same time. What's the problem you see with how Facebook and services like it join extrinsic and intrinsic purposes?**

**R 44 —** I think it is in the scope and quality of the resources it provides its users with which they can pursue their own purposes for their own sake. Facebook's extrinsic purposes within the consumption system subvert and corrupt the pursuit of intrinsic activity on it.

**V 45 — You mean the way their procedures and algorithms draw users into repetitive, self-revealing activities allowing the company to place a lot of ads and aggregate all sorts of valuable information about consumers?**

**R 46 —** Yes. For most users, Facebook proffers highly structured, rather simple-minded, self-generated activities, engaging but not particularly formative. Users autonomously generate a huge amount of repetitive activity on it, a vast amount of marginally meaningful communication.

**V 47 — Well, it might not be a great cultural flowering, but is it harmful? Isn't the rationalization for it that 2+ billion people seem to want it? Are you going to say they may not or should not do so?**

**R 48 —** No. I'm going to say that Facebook is a very clever system for expropriating the leisure time of billions of persons in order to commodify it for the profit of a few. But no material need drives people to give up their leisure to Facebook. They are free to join it and free to leave it. and I ask why they join it. And the best answer I can come up with is that they do it for want of good alternatives, and that's where ecological change comes it.

**V 49 — So you are suggesting that we need to introduce better alternatives into the ecology of communication with which people can engage cultural resources for their own sake, without all the concomitant exploitation of their time and effort.**

**R 50 —** Exactly. Facebook and the like demonstrate a huge desire shared by people around the globe for systems through which they can act for its own sake, to the point that they will allow their leisure time to be highly exploited for extrinsic purposes by those designing and providing the systems. People use it for want of better alternatives.

**V 51 — So. To answer my original question. Here we aspire to develop a place where people can use the leisure they demonstrably have to pursue more fully its original goals of human self-development without subjecting their efforts to the exploitative overhead conventionally imposed.**

**R 52 —** That's it. I think its worth a try. How about you?

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# Forming ourselves and our world

V and R grapple with their difficulty seeing concretely what resources visitors and curators on *A Place to Study* will work with. They discuss a loose analogy: Wikipedia + WikiSource minus the prohibition of posting original research. They distinguish between a workplace and a website. V finds a bias in the preliminary content and R acknowledges it, but assures V that *A Place to Study* will move from this male, white, Western bias towards an inclusive racial, cultural, linguistic representation. They leave off contemplating factors that complicate efforts to realize that aspiration.

V 1 — There you are! I've got a question, R. You explained that *forming ourselves* takes place life long for each and all of us and suggested that *A Place to Study* seeks to serve as a constructive resource for us in that process.

R 2 — That's right. We talk about resources and discuss what we can learn about using them well as forming ourselves takes place in lived experience.

V 3 — Well, I went and poked around the active side of *A Place to Study*. The resources I saw there aren't quite what I expected. I understand the site is just starting up, but from the examples there, I'm not sure how you expect visitors to use it.

R 4 — Yeah, I've had the same worry. It's hard to explain. Lived experience is tricky—it's always right here, but then it's gone. Sometimes examples get in the way. When thinking about what the site would be, I'd say that it would be a little like Wikipedia, only different in a key way, but I wasn't very clear what that way would be. Imagining it, I simply pictured something like Wikipedia without its policy of No original research ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No\\_original\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_original_research)).

V 5 — Me too, that's what I've been doing, with various kinds of original sources thrown in—Wikipedia plus Wikisource. That's not *A Place to Study*, but somehow I'm having trouble making clear what it'll add up to.

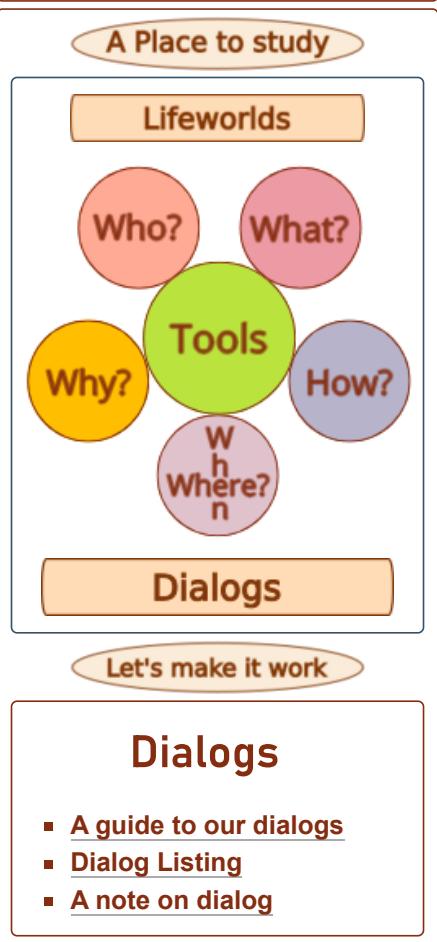
R 6 — In working with the site, I discovered how hard it is to understand our own intentions well. For a long time, I was trying to start a website "for" study, using a variety of names, as if we could somehow package a program for study. We often think of ourselves going to websites *for* something—information, essays and ideas, news, opinion, social interaction.

V 7 — Well, we go to Amazon *to shop*, but I guess given Amazon's fulfillment powers, we go there *for* whatever it is we want or need. Ah ha! A place "*to*" study—people won't come here for something, to get something. They come to do something, to study something.

R 8 — Exactly. I like to think of *A Place to Study* as a workplace, not a website. We will have information, like Wikipedia, and sources, like Wikisource, but those are merely resources, not the objectives one seeks here. This is a place to study, and to study, not anything and everything, but specifically one's own self-formation and liberal learning, cultivating one's powers of judgment, taste, and conviction.

V 9 — OK, I'm beginning to understand what should and should not be here as resources to study. You want to include cultural resources that foster a person's self-cultivation and autonomous development. But how do you know what those things are?

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R 10 — Difficult question! We are not going to put much faith either on mechanisms of revelation, religion, or on systems of confirmation, science. Perhaps the question is poorly posed, as if it has a conclusive answer.

V 11 — I don't get that. Questions have answers, even if no one yet knows the answer or how to get the answer. No?

R 12 — Maybe. Definitely if everything is fully determinate, the necessary result of its antecedents. But what if reality is in some small part indeterminate? Wouldn't some questions then have no set answers?

V 13 — The actuality of indeterminacy — I need some time to get my head around that.

R 14 — You and the physicists. But they're working at it. But let us speculate that in some ill-understood way some actual aspect of reality is in substance and process actually indeterminate. If reality is in part determinate and in part indeterminate, would not the interaction of the two parts go on indefinitely as a continuous process? On one side, life itself, in all its complexity, would be the agency of that process, forever making itself determinate by giving form to the indeterminate. On the other side, death, in its brute finality, would reset the balance, terminating the determinate form, giving it back, so to speak, to the indeterminate.

V 15 — Ah. . . . You've become kind of cosmic! Would this come down for you and me and those around us to the idea that each lives life forming it as best each can, and we will each give it the best meaning that each can manage in the midst of challenging circumstances until we each die and then it is done? Isn't that terribly egocentric?

R 16 — I don't think so. . . . I conduct my life in the company of many others, many different lives, not only human, but the lives of all sorts of other living creatures, animals, plants, bacteria, viruses. The lives we can lead interact and intersect—we're all in it together, each living as an autonomous agent in the company of many, many others.

V 17 — Now I feel overwhelmed with complexities. What do you think this all means for the studying that we might come here to do?

R 18 — To me it means that we have a criterion which suggests that we come here to study, in the company of others, how we can and should achieve form ourselves and give ourselves meaning through our lives. We do so as peers of one another, all being here in the world together. We recognize that each can and should make our judgments for ourselves, based on the best reasons we can set forth, and we do that collaboratively, together, in common, within the scope of the place itself in a narrow sense, as this place to study together, and in a broader sense, as a place within the large world of living interaction, as the locus within which our lives will all unfold.

V 19 — Uh. You talk a lot about "the best" — the best meaning, the best reasons, I suppose the best resources as well. Who are you to say what of all things are the best ones?

R 20 — Whoa! I have no idea what's *better* or *best* in an objective context. I don't think these terms have much meaning in the objective world of the objective observer. But we are talking here about lived experience—your "I" coping with your circumstances, continually buffeted by actual forces having to perceive your situation, make judgments, and take actions to maintain yourself. In that situation, *worse* and *worst*, *better* and *best*, have existential meaning, however contingent and difficult to grasp. They are ideas the meaning of which to us we put to use in dynamically judging how to modulate our attempts at self-maintenance.

V 21 — OK. Maybe I'm beginning to understand what was bothering me in what I found looking at the initial resources put up to study here. I see how they relate to the intention, but they seem do so in a skewed or biased way—primarily the literary work of dead, white, Western males.

R 22 — Yeah. It's a biographical accident. That indicates the context of lived experience within which self-formation and liberal learning has taken place for the persons who have been starting the site up. They don't want to limit it to that, but they would be faking things in filling it out with matters outside their past experience.

V 23 — So as their experience broadens and people with other patterns of experience join in, you think the site will outgrow that bias.

R 24 — I think so. But circumstances are real constraints, so the selection of resources will outgrow initial biases gradually, slower than many might like.

V 25 — What sort of circumstances will have significant limiting effects?

R 26 — Well, I think that over long haul copyright will disappear, but over several decades it will affect what resources we can and cannot work with. Right now the site has a very small user community, limiting our technical sophistication, which in turn limits the modes of study feasible through the site. And it also severely limits our scope of knowledge. Further, I suspect the concern people feel over potential biases—linguistic, racial, ethnic, gender, age—has been exacerbating a sense of inadequacy because so little in contemporary communication brings out the common humanity that spans us all. We revert to the least common denominator and fail to grasp for the apex to which the encompassing community of all can and should aspire.

V 27 — Your hope is moving, but the *de facto* bias will be a problem for many. But maybe it will work. You're saying, that anyone, whatever their roots and self-perceived identity, has to recognize that they come to questions of self-formation with *de facto* biases and work with those in a constructive way. The living whole encompasses all of them. It is not some abstract residue after all the *de facto* biases have been subtracted out.

R 28 — Yes, but I haven't put it very clearly, and I think it is something we are only going to muddle our way to eventually. I believe that ultimately all life shares a few common aspirations, but there are many formative contexts within which we experience self-formation and liberal learning, and within each of those contexts some of us are more favored by it than others are. The irony is that the least favored often perceive most clearly the actual formative power of the context.

V 29 — You are describing with that irony how woke minorities call on complacent majorities to strive more actively to realize more fully the possibilities of the shared aspirations?

R 30 — Right.... When I was young, a very thoughtful critic and novelist, Albert Murray, published a book that impressed me a lot, *The Omni-Americans*. He was born in 1916 in a rural Black community in Nokomis, Alabama, less than an hour from Mobile, and he kept transcending, but not forgetting, his origins. I think of him as a great humanist writer, one who expressed a humanism through an American sensibility, an American sensibility sharpened as a Negro within it, from that vantage having a kind of an omni advantage, an ability to affirm expansively all of life in its whole vitality while actually saddened by the binding limitations that need not be. That's the humanism of the blues. We must study to hear the blues in all its forms.

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# Hello

To educate educators!  
But the first ones must educate themselves!  
And for these I write.

Nietzsche<sup>[1]</sup>

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R, an old hand, and V, a newbie, talk about *A Place to Study* and its place in education....

R 1 — Hi. Thanks for stopping by. First time?

V 2 — Yeah. A friend told me to check it out. I like your motto up there — Nietzsche. He's on. I've had it with being told what to do. Call me V.

R 3 — Glad to clue you in a bit. I'm R. Here we work to strengthen cultural activities that social media are disrupting.

V 4 — What don't they disrupt?

R 5 — Not much. Here persons strive to form themselves, learning liberally with free, comprehensive resources in the digital commons.

V 6 — Hmm. . . . The bits about *free resources* and the *digital commons* aside, you sound like a college admissions officer.

R 7 — In a way, I guess. But higher education is losing its touch, over-packaged, and as I said, we strengthen things the new media disrupt—humane culture, the liberal arts, a sense of justice, the courage to face intractable problems together. Throughout history, persons have pursued self-formation and liberal learning, humanizing life as best they could. Innovative disruptions won't stop that. Not even a pandemic! To the disrupters' motto, "Move fast and break things," we say, "Not so fast! Move slow and mend things."

V 8 — Got it. Don't expect viral novelty, here. But in opposing cultural disruption, what do you do here? I catch that you do some educative work online, but as I understand it, educators have been busy with computers for decades without much by way of major improvements. Then the pandemic forced everyone in education to try it out. Haven't heard many huzzas, have you?

R 9 — Fewer and fewer. I've spent 40 years trying to improve schools and universities — formal educational efforts — with networked multimedia. It's grown disappointing.

V 10 — Sorry, but what else would you have done? The digital — not plastics — that's where the action's been.

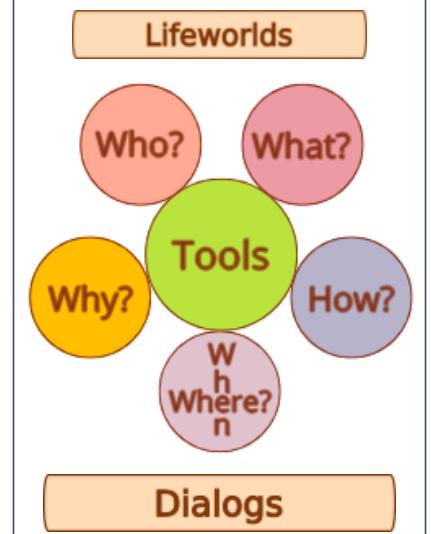
R 11 — True. And certainly educational systems need improvement. If persons working in them see ways to get it using *A Place to Study*, that's great! They should go to it! But we're really trying something else.

V 12 — Something else? You're losing me a bit. What else is there —, unh, what else do you have in mind?

R 13 — It's not obvious, I understand. To put it bluntly, we don't want to work on, in, or through the educational system.

V 14 — I hear those words, but don't understand what they mean. Where is this place outside the educational system?

## A Place to study



## Dialogs

### Let's make it work

## Dialogs

- [A guide to our dialogs](#)
- [Dialog Listing](#)
- [A note on dialog](#)

R 15 — It isn't just over there waiting for us to notice it. It is a possible place, one we want to construct. What people are calling "education" doesn't exhaust the possibilities. We seek to construct a place for an alternative mode of education.

V 16 — I'm beginning to catch on, but you need to fill out this alternative kind of education before I can really grasp what you are saying. "Alternative" isn't a new word in educational talk.

R 17 — Fair enough. First, we find the dehumanization of education that's taken place in modern history revolting. Institutions like schools and colleges aren't "education," and no amount of testing and prepping will educate statistical abstractions like age cohorts to be better at math or reading or anything else. Every person, each person — persons acquire their education, for each a unique one, in their lived experience through the course of life.

V 18 — OK, I get it that we're going to talk a lot about persons and engage in activities here as persons, not as roles — pupils, teachers, adolescents, and so on. But I'm still not clear how you want to use digital technologies outside of existing educational systems. Don't you have to deal with institutions, curricula, programs of study, assessment — all the stuff that the system comprises?

R 19 — In a way, our way, the proper way. In the circumstances within which each person's educational experience takes place, each of us copes with instantiations of all the abstractions that constitute "the educational system." We cope as *persons* with the "system" that we experience as circumstances — conditions, facilitations, impediments, distractions, advantages, limitations, blockages, accidents of many sorts. We deal with them as important parts of the conditions impinging on our personal formative effort.

V 20 — But as part of our circumstances, the system seems formidable. It's comprehensive, detailed, exacting. Getting an education requires absorbing fully the influences it exerts. Don't we have to cope with it on its terms? If we don't measure up well enough at the many junctures in it, we find our life choices narrowing. Many never learn to work the system, and end up among "the poorly educated" — spiraling down, another in the doomed assemblage of the under-employed, the voiceless, the deaths of despair.

R 21 — It seems that way. And the more we think it is that way, the more we create a pedagogical monoculture. As we let the system spread everywhere, it gets culturally dangerous. But persons are alive. We are not mere objects — entries in a grade book, registrants for a test, names on a degree. We are vital agents, capable of intentional action. Our lives are not free of constraints, but as living entities, we act in and on our conditions, our circumstances, we use the constraints to maintain, to fulfill ourselves through intentional effort as best we can.

V 22 — Isn't that what engaged, active students do within the educational system? Why do you want to go outside it?

R 23 — Sure. Everyone copes in their way, and certainly some do so with sustained vigor, attention, imagination, and curiosity. But let's not be naïve. Lots of students coast through the system, developing themselves a good deal less than they might. And consistently, many persons find the system hard to use and out of sync with their purposes and seem unable to use it well. Should they feel it fair that the system blows them off, like it or lump it?

V 24 — Well. . . . But isn't it the case that they didn't do well?

R 25 — Yes. But why do you ask that? Why not ask whether the system did well? It failed them. They're living proof it isn't what it is supposed to be, the source of a sound basic education for all.

V 26 — Is that the danger of the pedagogical monoculture you mentioned?

R 27 — Yes, a part of it. But it's part of a larger question. If the system won't pay attention to those it clearly serves poorly, how will it come to grips with whether it is serving everyone together well enough to meet the challenges emerging in the fullness of our lives?

V 28 — Hmm. I sense you're asking something I'd never paid much attention to.

R 29 — Well, we infer a lot about the character and capacity of persons by how well they succeed in the educational system. Does that tell us much about the adequacy of the system? If it fails those who do poorly, might it also be failing those who do well?

V 30 — You're asking what happens if the educational system leaves, not only those who do poorly, but everyone unable to keep up with the scale and complexities of life itself. You're acknowledging all the worries that human prodigality is undercutting the global capacity to sustain a humane way of life, or at the extreme, the possibility of life on earth itself — Global warming, resource depletion, unexpected pandemics, the spread of authoritarianism and the politics of resentment, things like that? But isn't that laying a heavy load on the educational system? Ah! But, I see. That's the monoculture problem! There's only one system; and if it's failing, we're up the creek.

R 31 — Yeah. We're saying that that is the need that had better mother invention. It's not only on inner city streets that dysfunction appears.

V 32 — OK. But need will mother invention only where it's possible. How are you going to use digital technologies as you put it, "outside of existing educational systems?"

R 33 — That's the question! But don't ask me for solutions to those problems just yet — the demand for solutions pulls us into the monoculture. We need to look elsewhere.

V 34 — OK. No solutions... for now. But we've got to know where to try starting. Where's the elsewhere?

R 35 — To answer, don't think first about "new media in education" or anything like that. Think about the familiar technologies that you and your peers, all of us, used as we climbed up the ladder in the current systems of instructional institutions. Think historically about persons comprising preceding generations and ask how they and their educators took advantage of the technological resources that then were relatively new to get us where we are now? What former "new technologies" enabled the present educational system to function as it does? Start with that question.

V 36 — Hmm. OK. I haven't paid much attention to that. But come to think of it, they're pretty obvious. Over preceding centuries, printing, bureaucratic organization, standardized classification, managing activity by the clock, motorized transportation were all transformative technological developments that have been essential to constructing the current educational system. People built existing educational systems by steadily finding pedagogical uses for all that. How's that?

R 37 — Right on. We needn't rehearse details here, but we should now push our questioning a step further back. Before those technologies enabled persons to build the big systems of formal instruction, how did most people get educated?

V 38 — Hunh! Beats me, but let me try. If I ever asked myself, I sort of assumed people then went to schools, only not for very long and not to very good schools. But I suspect you're going to tell a different story.

R 39 — I'd say that a few schools existed, and some of those were pretty good. But very few persons would then have gone to something you might call a school, good or bad. Instead, most people, in distinctive variations according to where they fit in the hierarchy of power and status, got their education through

a mix of live-in apprenticeship in household communities, enriched with religion, superstition, storytellers, folklore, and the life skills appropriate to their given station. In those situations, one usually learned as one could from whoever was around, sometimes structured for the wealthier kids by an accompanying tutor. Life within household workplaces, ranging across peasant granges, guild ateliers, and aristocratic courts, initiated most persons into work and to leisure in pre-modern life. You get glimpses of it sprinkled through literary depictions of life across cultures and eras.

V 40 — OK. Should of thought of that. Let me guess your next point. You want to suggest that the builders of our formal instructional systems did not apply their printing, bureaucratic organization, standardized classification, time management by the clock, motorized transportation — all their technological innovations — to those dominant educational activities of their time, all that apprenticing and storytelling in the school of life. Instead, they used their transformative technologies to unlock the potentialities of the few miserable schools — the pedagogical weeds among the households, workshops, and courts of the culture. In a sense, they created the centralized educational institutions of *post-traditional* modernity from out of left field.

R 41 — That is the narrative. Of course, you won't often hear it told with quite that arc.<sup>[2]</sup> Nevertheless, the rise of formal systems of instruction from what prior informal systems scarcely did at all suggests the narrative we want to use in prototyping the construction of postmodern education. We can do it best leaving formal systems alone, concentrating on the educational situations largely ignored in the highly developed apparatus of formal instruction. Exactly how that is happening is not yet clear — the mists of uncertainty always shroud origins until what they gave rise to has clearly emerged. But we think, better, we are wagering our effort, acting as if a place to study, perhaps this one, *A Place to Study*, or perhaps some others, will be a central component of what is taking place.

V 42 — Whoa! A million questions! Many doubts! Both fears and hopes, anticipation! My friend was right, you're doing something worth checking out, a lot to ponder. It's going to take a while. I'm psyched!

R 43 — Sounds that way. Take it slower.

V 44 — I see and feel the mists of uncertainty. Something new sometimes seems familiar, triggering a knee-jerk dismissal or misunderstanding. Or strange enough to make us blind to it. Hey! Something just got clear!

R 45 — What's that?

V 46 — Last year, I tried hard to make sense of how John Keats, the romantic poet, talked about the importance of *negative capability*. He wrote of it in a short, slap-dash letter, a fuzzy thought about important possibilities. The gist — the path to great things often entails not making your mind up too quickly — seemed evident, but I left off, frustrated, because I hadn't grappled with an intrinsically important and complex possibility, something big and difficult at stake that made me feel that I needed to hold my judgment open, long and hard, until I became ready and able to address it fully in my actions. Now, I've stumbled into a place where I sense I should use negative capability, persevering in uncertainty, to see and judge rightly what might be at stake here. It'll take a while and I'll keep coming back until I can make up my own mind about whether you are going to be able to use digital technologies outside instructional systems in an educationally meaningful way.

R 47 — Great. That's what we hope for. It's the key to self-formation and learning liberally. As you check things out, you'll hear and see stuff that seems a lot like what you've heard and seen before, but don't infer from the apparent familiarity that you know immediately where it's leading. Get the whole picture of what can and should take place here. It's a place, not an idea, a place where

*study*, the verb, a form of activity, takes place. Don't idolize the objects, the texts, the images, ideas, and structures stored in memory and represented on the screen. We study, not these, but the human activity that we can make evident in association with the objects.

V 48 — I hear what you say and sort of grasp it and look forward to understanding fully what you mean. But I must say, I'm still puzzled by this idea, "outside the existing systems." That's the place you're seeking, but I don't see it or understand how we might conjure it forth.

Template:Close

1. *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) p. 50, Walter Kaufmann, trans.
2. Usually, educational histories present the rise of formal instruction as filling a void, or evolving from a prior base of schooling that has been anachronistically inflated in importance.

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# Help – a dialog

V 1 — It's been a week now, R, and you're still messing around with all this Help stuff. Don't you know no one reads Help-pages?!?

## Concerns

R 2 — I know. Usually, I don't read them myself. We think we're supposed to know it. And if we don't know it, *they* should have been clever enough to make it that we don't need to know it. But that's not really what *they* do.

V 3 — What do you mean? Doesn't it make sense to cultivate an intellectual ergonomics in which we design communication systems for maximally efficient human use, cutting out the extraneous, simplifying the essential, assuring a positive outcome for all? Whew! I actually said it, one breadth.

R 4 — Ah, you know my liking for "*perhaps*." Here in *A Place to Study* we try to interest ourselves in things for their own sake. Now I recognize that practitioners have become preoccupied with using linguistic expression to produce consequences and that theorists obsess with explaining those uses with the concept of performativity. I think it has become dangerously one-sided.

V 5 — How so? Or maybe I can guess. You are going to say that it all loses track of the temporal relativity of language uses, or something like that, overly abstracting how language serves us in living life.

R 6 — Yes. Our lives take place in our actual present. Used there prospectively, looking ahead to future possibility, utterance cannot be performative, but at most contingently intentional. Used in the present retrospectively about past occurrences, utterance cannot be performative, but at most potentially explanatory. As I see it, language does not instantiate action, it instantiates thought.

V 7 — OK, this is interesting but I'm not sure how to link it up with your interest in the Help stuff here. Are you suggesting the Help stuff is more important on a site for persons engaged in thinking together seriously than on most social software?

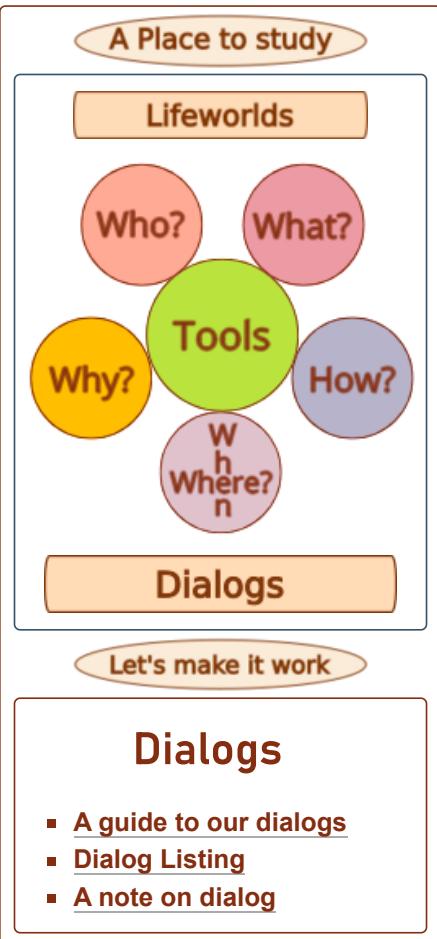
R 8 — Well, yes. I've sort of surprised myself with that view. I object to a lot of social software, more strongly I feel exploited and betrayed in using it. It seems engineered to reduce the space of thought and to replace it with a space of virtual activity. In using it, one fills in boxes rather than thinking through and expressing one's ideas. The design makes it easy to do a few, rather simple things—to post pictures, to state what you've been doing, to like (or now on Facebook in its tsunami of nuance, also to love, to haha, to wow, to sad, and to angry), to find friends, to scroll at the news feed, to puff your cause, and so on. It is all designed to occupy us in routine, reactive activity, holding us as sitting ducks for targeted ads and messaging while putting minimal strain on our creative capacities.

V 9 — I get the point. To think clearly and communicate substantively takes sustained effort and the acquisition of skill and style. A site like *A Place to Study* should support our doing so.

R 10 — Exactly. But doing so presents challenges. It takes more than clear how-to instructions.

V 11 — How so? Let's add concise to clear and I should think you have it nailed—we should give clear and concise how-to help.

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R 12 — I'm not favoring muddy, long-winded help, but you started by observing that nobody reads help, even clear and concise help. Maybe that means that our knowing how to do X, Y, or Z isn't people want in the way of help.

V 13 — Hmm. You're right, I guess, that people don't read help because it is unclear and verbose, but because somehow it isn't what they want. I'm a bit puzzled to say what it is that they want.

R 14 — Yeah. Let's take our critique of social software seriously. If it is all a matter of reducing communication to a set of easy actions, making language as an instantiation of action, we will click the link, check off the options, fill in the box, and upload the file to see what happens. If that mystifies us, we may check the instructions, and if it doesn't it's on to the next thing.. But if communication instantiates thought, then the problem of facilitating it on, in through, and by a place to study becomes a problem of our helping ourselves to form and express our hopes and ideas, our feelings, convictions, and reasons.

V 15 — This opens a flood of questions! Does it transform a place to study into a house for instruction? Aren't you undercutting your own democratic aspirations for the site?

R 16 — That is a risk, but one we must face up to. Persons come to *A Place to Study* with a prior history, which none of us can wish away our own or that of anyone else. Thus each of us comes to the site, or the place of any other human experience, having to contend with the inescapable problems of our human condition in the inimitable way required by the unique actuality of the particular life each of us is living.

V 17 — As you put if, we are instantiating thought here, not action. I had better hear you out on this, holding questions until I understand your full thought better.

R 18 — Good. Whether young and old, poorly or highly schooled, all the endless particulars unique to each person color the distinct ways in which we experience the fundamental problems of communicating our thought. We seek to study these we attend to them in our efforts to communicate effectively. We try to think clearly what we want to say and we seek to feel empowered to express well—accurately and persuasively—what we want to get across.

V 19 — Yeah. Sometimes in conversation I get down on myself thinking "that was what I said but not what I meant," and sometimes I've got good words but I have trouble getting them out in a way that someone will pay attention to them and understand.

R 20 — Right. To manifest thought verbally we need to cloth it in the words that mean what we mean and we need to adjust those words so that what another will take them to mean corresponds to what we intend them to mean. And it is not a step-wise sequence, but a continuous process.

V 21 — I get it—in thinking about the second side I often recognize that the words I started out with aren't really the ones expressing what I mean and I adjust both what I have to say and how I intend to say it. But what does all this have to do with online help?

R 22 — Well, we've been talking about language, not as a structure or system with identifiable, objective features—a grammar, lexicon, and syntax—that work thus and so, some looming monolith. We've been talking about it rather as a medium, as an intermediary that we seek to use intentionally to bring the ineffable actuality of our thinking into our own awareness and then to call it to the awareness of others so that it can interact with the ineffable actuality of their thinking.

V 23 — So, we are talking about a *medium*, but what significance does that have for developing help resources for the people working on *A Place to Study*?

R 24 — Let me finish. We are talking about a medium and a medium is not an objective thing outside of us, but a field for our expressive agency in which we are a part, immersed within it. *A Place to Study* too is a part of this field of agency, as well as everyone doing anything on or around it. In other words, the assistance we seek and can use is not simply with our specific site, but something much more encompassing. And it is very new, for all we know quite unprecedented in its affordances, and subject to rapid transformations. We need help, less in doing things with a specific software program, and more in working with it in relation to the encompassing medium and to pursuing our intentionality within that.

V 25 — Wow! This seems to change the game a bit. Can you give a specific or two about what should go into the help resources on *A Place to Study* in light of this understanding of the task?

R 26 — Sure. To begin with, it is a bit unusual to start our help resources with this discussion itself. I think it suggests several important points. First, mastering the medium is and will be a lifelong process. Second, however great our virtuosity with this or other programs becomes, we will still have to make difficult judgments—what new skills should I acquire, what old ones should I set aside and forget, what potential ones should I ignore, how do I keep my capacities commensurate with my intentions for their use. And third, we activate help resources through study, inquiry, clicking the "edit" or "view source" links and then trying to understand what has brought an interesting effect about, be it cool or a glitch.

V 27 — Doesn't this put a damper on the aspiration to make self-formation and liberal learning accessible to all persons? It seems to put a premium on a really broad and deep understanding of digital communications.

R 28 — It sets a high bar for each person's self-formation and liberal learning, but it would be pandering not to do so—we live complex lives in a complicated world. But we set no bar impeding entry. Each person can engage their self-formation only from their achieved state of self-development and for each that is an ongoing process. Neither expertise nor immaturity are permanent states of being—the young mature and acquire capacity; the mature age, tire, their skills risk stagnation, and sooner or later they pass away.

V 29 — But what about those whose formal schooling served them poorly and have had few subsequent opportunities for self-development?

R 30 — To start a long journey, we must begin from where we are, and the journey of life ends in death—what's interesting in it is what we do along the way. We need help at the point where our palpable ignorance constrains our felt intentions. Great help resources will have something that each can use to reduce those constraints that bind them.

V 31 — That sounds great, but I think people need some specifics. Wikipedia's Cheat Sheet is the least common denominator of that, helpful in getting started. But you've convinced me we need to address our needs more generally. Let's think about that and talk again soon about how we might address them more concretely.

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# Intention

A draft, supplanted by [Forming ourselves and our world](#).

V and R grapple with their difficulty seeing concretely what resources visitors and curators on *A Place to Study* will work with. They discuss a loose analogy: Wikipedia + WikiSource minus the prohibition of posting original research. They distinguish between a workplace and a website. V finds a bias in the preliminary content and R acknowledges it, but assures V that *A Place to Study* will move from this male, white, Western bias towards an inclusive racial, cultural, linguistic representation. They leave off contemplating factors that complicate efforts to realize that aspiration.

V 1 — There you are! I've got a question, R. I went and poked around the active side of *A Place to Study*. The resources I saw there aren't quite what I expected. I understand the site is just starting up, but from the examples there, I'm not sure how you expect visitors to use it.

R 2 — Yeah, I've had the same worry. Sometimes examples get in the way. When thinking about what the site would be, I'd say that it would be a little like Wikipedia, only different in a key way, but I wasn't very clear what that way would be. Imagining it, I simply pictured something like Wikipedia without its policy of "[No original research](#) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wp:No\\_original\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wp:No_original_research))."

V 3 — Yeah, that's what I've been doing, with various kinds of original sources thrown in—Wikipedia plus Wikisource. That's not *A Place to Study*, but somehow I'm having trouble making clear what it is going to add up to.

R 4 — In working with the site, I discovered how hard it is to understand our own intentions well. For a long time, I was trying to start a website *for study*, using a variety of names. We usually think of ourselves going to websites *for* something—information, essays and ideas, news, opinion, social interaction.

V 5 — Well, we go to Amazon *to shop*, but I guess given Amazon's fulfillment powers, we go there *for* whatever it is we want or need. Ah ha! *A place to study*—people won't come here for something, to get something. They come to do something, to study something.

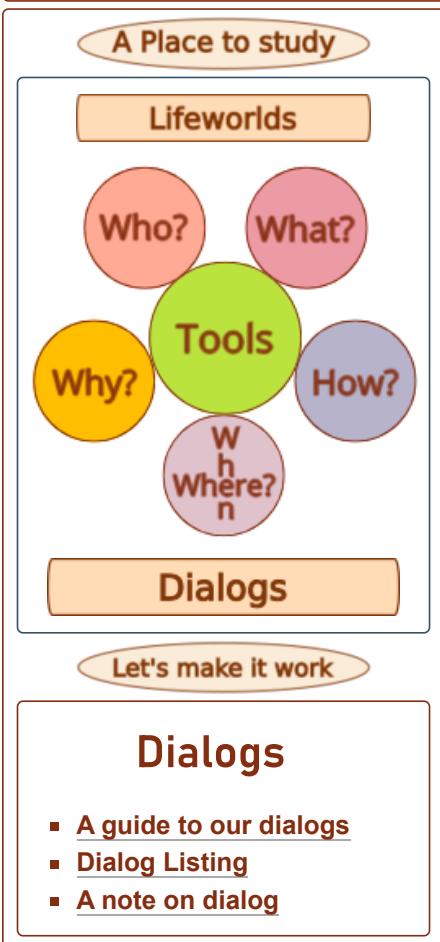
R 6 — Exactly. I like to think of *A Place to Study* as a workplace, not a website. We will have information, like Wikipedia, and sources, like Wikisource, but those are merely resources, not the objectives one seeks here. This is a place to study, and to study, not anything and everything, but specifically one's own self-formation and liberal learning, cultivating one's powers of judgment, taste, and conviction.

V 7 — OK, I'm beginning to understand what should and should not be here as resources for study. You want to include cultural resources that foster a person's self-cultivation and autonomous development. But how do you know what those things are?

R 8 — Difficult question! We are not going to put much faith either on mechanisms of revelation, religion, or on systems of confirmation, science. Perhaps the question is poorly posed, as if it has a conclusive answer.

V 9 — I don't get that. Questions have answers, even if no one yet knows the answer or how to get the answer. No?

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R 10 — If reality is in part determinate and in part indeterminate, would not the interaction of the two parts go on indefinitely as a continuous process? On one side, life itself, in all its complexity, would be the agency of that process, forever making itself determinate by giving form to the indeterminate. On the other side, death, in its brute finality, would reset the balance, terminating the determinate form given to the indeterminate.

V 11 — Ah. . . . This is kind of cosmic! Would this come down for you and me and those around us to the idea that each of us lives our life forming it as best we can and we will each give it the best meaning that we can until we each die and then it is done? Isn't that terribly egocentric?

R 12 — I don't think so—I conduct my life in the company of many others, many different lives, not only human, but the lives of all sorts of other living creatures, animals, plants, bacteria, viruses. The lives we can lead interact and intersect—we're all in it together.

V 13 — Now I feel overwhelmed with complexities. What do you think this all means for the studying that we might come here to do?

R 14 — To me it means that we have a criterion which suggests that we come here to study, in the company of others, how we can and should achieve form ourselves and give ourselves meaning through our lives. We do so as peers of one another, all being here in the world together. We recognize that each can and should make our judgments for ourselves, based on the best reasons we can set forth, and we do that collaboratively, together, in common, within the scope of the site itself, as a place to study together, and within the large world of living interaction, as the locus within which our lives will all unfold.

V 15 — Beautiful. But to go back to what I found looking at the initial resources put up to study here, I see how they relate to the intention, but I think they do so in a narrow or biased way—primarily the literary work of dead, white, Western males.

R 16 — Yeah. That is the primary frame of reference for efforts at self-formation and liberal learning of the persons who are starting the site up. I think the site will outgrow that bias, partly through the conscious effort over time of those who embody it and partly as persons who embody other biases start participating in the site. Circumstances are real constraints, however, so the site will outgrow initial biases gradually, slower than many might like.

V 17 — What sort of circumstances will have significant limiting effects?

R 18 — Well, I think that over long haul copyright will disappear, but over several decades it will affect what resources we can and cannot work with. Right now the site has a very small user community, limiting our technical sophistication, which in turn limits the modes of study feasible through the site. And it also severely limits our scope of knowledge. Further, I suspect the concern people feel over potential biases—linguistic, racial, ethnic, gender, age—has been exacerbating a sense of inadequacy because so little in contemporary communication brings out the common humanity that spans us all. We shun the least common denominator and fail to grasp for the apex which the encompassing community of all might aspire.

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# My canon

According to one meaning, a "canon" concerns a general law, rule, principle, or criterion by which we judge something. Each person life-long forms her emerging canon, uniquely her own —her judgment. In forming it, she refers to other persons, cultural works, places and institutions, challenging problems, all sorts of matters that appear imbued with a charismatic, compelling meaning towards which a person reaches out with aspiration and hope, sometimes aversion and scorn. She drops, adds, and adjusts components in this canon, her points of reference in forming her judgment, turning them like a kaleidoscope throughout the course of life.

V 1 — I've been wondering what you mean by "My canon"? I suppose you are indicating a group of works considered to be of pre-eminent quality, the books that show up in Western civilization courses. People still argue about them some. But why the possessive "my"?

R 2 — Contentions about *THE canon* have little interest here. The "canon wars" show the narrowness of print-based pedagogy in higher education. We don't need to squeeze everything into a workable course syllabus.

V 3 — But isn't the idea that important educational value arises when many people have read the same set of great books? It becomes a heritage they have in common.

R 4 — Lots of people think so, but I don't. For many years I taught within that framework and became convinced it is a dumb one—"It's the third week of October. Let's all together now appreciate the greatness of Augustine's *City of God*."

V 5 — OK. Since I took "Contemporary Civilization," I haven't much savored the readings. CC sort of trivialized them because a book a week, sometimes two weeks, doesn't give a kid the time to really engage it. It's as if the students are all hack book reviewers churning through the latest releases, trying to spot the parts that will excite enthusiastic or scornful interest. Why bring it back as "my canon"?

R 6 — On *A Place to Study* we don't tell anyone what to read or when you must read it. But we do want to activate some residual value in a tired concept, "a canon of cultural work." According to one meaning, a "canon" concerns a general law, rule, principle, or criterion with reference to which we make judgments about things. Persons form criteria of judgment and taste by taking cultural achievements seriously, attending to them closely, and integrating what's at stake in them into their interior discourse. *A Place to Study* aims to broaden, deepen, and facilitate the opportunities that people have to do that. But persons do it, not as a collectivity, but each as she lives in constructive tension with her circumstances. Collectively, as persons form their personal powers of judgment, it all results in a vast mesh of overlapping personal standards and criteria. The net quality of it all has great import for everyone.

V 7 — Well, I can see how a cultural canon might have formed as serious readers ruminated over a relatively finite body of work, sharing judgments about the various parts over time, coming to a rough consensus what's outstanding in it. But I am still not clear about the "my" in your phrase, "my canon."

R 8 — Look. We need to get out of a well-established mindset. You sort of get it that with a digital pedagogy, many things are radically different. This is one of them. Here consensus counts for almost nothing. Consensus implies a level of agreement, which glosses over differences. Study culminates in a power of

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



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recognition, an ability to perceive and understand differences. Whatever they may have done in prior time, the literary and artistic canons aren't serving to form taste and judgment in the general public very well these days. So let's try being protestants.

V 9 — Eh? What? I'm not following you.

R 10 — Sorry. It's frustrating, a matter of seeing familiar things through a different form, a different *Gestalt* when the rabbit becomes a duck. Your engagement with THE canon as presented in CC or some other syllabus, through assigned texts regulated by the academic calendar, may have been perfunctory. That doesn't mean that you have been lacking in fruitful, inward experiences with cultural resources that help you shape your own judgment, taste, and character. The principles don't come from the cultural works that each of us may study, good or bad. The works don't contain the principles. Each of us forms our own canon, our own set of principles in our spontaneous, often unreflective way. Thinking recurrently, recursively about "*my canon*" should help a person bring that process into her full awareness and enhance her capacity to conduct her life purposefully. In doing that she adds her increment to the collective probity of humanity.

V 11 — I imagine that the keepers of THE canon, whatever its variant, would not consider a lot of what affects my tastes and judgments as canon-worthy stuff. I'm aware of having patterned my judgment through some nutty fads as an adolescent, but I came to see their limits, and that experience, arising from simple maturation, curiosity, self-doubt, and new aspirations strengthened my discrimination about what to take seriously. Is that what you mean in suggesting that we try being protestants, that we recognize our own authority and responsibility for them?

R 12 — Each person, I believe, life-long forms her emerging canon, uniquely her own. It includes other persons, cultural works, places and institutions, challenging problems, all sorts of matters that appear imbued with a charismatic, compelling meaning towards which a person reaches out with aspiration and hope, sometimes aversion and scorn. Over time, each of us keeps seeing the limits of these norms we've each formed and taken on. As we do that, each of us moves on to other possibilities, and if all goes well, each time each of us learns something to improve on our past experience and judgment and taste, each strengthens their character and incrementally that of everyone together.

V 13 — I'm beginning to catch on, I think. For a while the section on Persons had a long chronological list of notables on it. The page freaked me out a bit. Who, given a dozen lifetimes, could study them all? And I sensed they were just a beginning selection. We would be in deep trouble if we needed to study all those figures in order to develop ourselves fully. It seemed absurd. I reacted that way because I thought, rather unconsciously, that each person's work was important because it contained significant principles which readers can and should extract from it, and the more the merrier, so to speak, and double credit by doing them all. I'm beginning to see that as the wrong way to look at such a list.

R 14 — That's right! Work by people such as those on the list can be useful, but not because they impart principles of judgment, character, taste, discrimination, or any other virtue. They are like dumbbells in the gym — you can get strong interacting with them in intelligent and strenuous ways, but the strength doesn't come from the dumbbells themselves, but from your interaction with them. And a good gym has lots of weights to work with, but only a fool would try to use them all. And many people build and maintain their strength without ever using weights at all.

V 15 — So why don't you just put a few things up, if it doesn't matter much which you work with, or none at all, if people can form their judgment in any and all settings?

R 16 —That's a good question and it really gets at what *A Place to Study* might accomplish. I don't think our instructional systems begin to do justice to the scope and diversity of the persons they serve. I would not quite go so far as to say that they amount to a one-size-fits-all system, but with a very few sizes serving an incredible diversity of persons across an extraordinary range of situations. This leads to powerful constraints and consequential omissions. But with the prevailing material conditions until very recent times, alternatives were not easily imaginable.

V 17 — You know my favorite question — can you be more concrete?

R 18 —I'll try. Let's take your own experience. In elementary school, what proportion of the time did the work at hand deeply excite your interest? Almost all the time, or more time than not, or roughly half and half, or clearly less of the time than you felt bored or alienated, or hardly ever?

V 19 — Honestly, I think my answer would vary some depending on what part of the curriculum we were talking about and when I started having different teachers for different subjects, which teacher I had. I think I was lucky each year if one subject and/or teacher, let's say a fifth, really excited my interest, and even then I did a lot of the work out of perseverance, not excitement. Three fifths would hover around half and half, and the last fifth would be pretty much a complete turn off.

R 20 — And as you got older?

V 21 — Middle school things began to shift and really changed in high school, interest receded as a motivator, replaced by various imperatives. I came from a social stratum in which preparing for higher education and the workplace exercised significant imperative force. So too did hormonal and social imperatives. I don't think we experienced much by way of intrinsic interest and the few who did stood a little apart.

R 22 — Overall, you sketch a bleaker picture than I expected. I've thought a significant proportion of students like yourself manage to base a tangible part of your activity on intrinsic interest, possibly without being very conscious of it. But for a lot of students, conditions — cultural, social, and material — prevent tacit interests from taking hold.

V 23 — Yeah. We'd act on tacit interests and rather dead-end enthusiasms shared among friends and in the extra curriculum. But I thought you were asking about the formal system. We were fixated in various ways on coping with the imperatives we felt. We knew that many would at some point be left behind, or from their vantage, the lucky ones would go off to the land of further opportunity. That's how many peers just drop out of sight and it takes a rare empathy to go back and reconnect. I recently watched a kind-of classic film, *American Graffiti*, that showed those distinctions precipitating out at the end of adolescence, 60 years ago. It's not much different now.

R 24 — It's hard to go back. We just don't think about it. Discussion of education, formal and informal all seems to turn on whether it is good enough and how to make it work better. We pay insufficient attention to the harm our educational activities do to many young persons and how that harm carries over into their later lives and into shared problems of public life. The explicit system fails very many people, even very many who succeed at succeeding and go on to lead unfulfilling lives. Too many people leave formal instruction convinced that their potentials are fixed and second-rate, resigned to settle for what turns up in life. *A Place to Study* should help persons of all backgrounds and in all conditions develop powerful intrinsic interests, sensing that they have robust, positive opportunities to do so.

V 25 — Sounds good! But how can we advance that through *A Place to Study*? In particular, why were you compiling that long list of personages, which would only grow many fold? And what does this talk about "my canon," which is still very fuzzy, got to do with it?

R 26 — Well, I'll briefly stake some ground with two assertions. First, we can and should get away from the idea that only a narrow selection of great books and a privileged sequence for learning sound ideas about the human condition and the natural order will impart to people the essential principles and stock of knowledge. There are many, many sequences of study through a vast array cultural resources in pursuit of which people can form a set of sound principles and acquire a stock of knowledge, both useful and meaningful. None of those resources impart anything. A person can and should actively form her principles and understanding by engaging whatever selection and sequence suits her interests with application and effort. The principles and understanding come from her studying, not from the materials she studies.

V 27 — Let me butt in. Given this assertion, with the long list, you were not scoping out what anyone should know, but rather beginning to indicate a useful universe of possible choice, a few of which any particular person might decide to study.

R 28 — That's right. And here's my second assertion. Engaged in a self-directed activity of study in a world of endless possibilities, a person continually faces significant contingencies concerning what possibilities to pursue and how to pursue them. In that situation, she naturally seeks some assistance, which will prove largely unhelpful if it concentrates on spelling out what a "good" student supposedly should get from studying this or that. Such assistance encourages the student to evade the contingencies she faces and to settle for parrotry instead of understanding. In contrast, useful assistance does not concern the outcome of study, but its process.

V 29 — I suspect the distinction you are making is pretty fine and I don't really grasp it from your words.

R 30 — Fair enough. A lot of instructional assistance concerns getting things right, which assumes that the instructor knows the correct or preferred result for the question at hand and helps the student arrive at that result, in effect removing the contingency. One can almost say that ensuring that people will not make mistakes constitutes the pervasive purpose of education.

V 31 — But by contingency, I understand it to mean the possibility of making mistakes or unproductive choices of what to study. What other kind of assistance might people offer than an effort to identify and correct the errors?

R 32 — Why assume contingency means the possibility of making mistakes? Of course in resolving a contingency, one may err, make a mistake, choose unwisely, and blunder. But one might also do good, choose wisely, and succeed. We experience contingencies as problems because we find ourselves uncertain about what we can and should do. In life, choices are rarely a binary right or wrong. Many different responses will each bring a complexity of ensuing consequences, which all ramify out into the unknown, making uncertainty inherent in the choice. To give assistance, one must first premise it on an admission that one does not and cannot know what the correct course might be.

V 33 — So the teacher does not know the answer. That's why we suspend judgment relative to the outcome. But if we don't know the outcome, how can we recommend anything about the process as you implied above?

R 34 — I don't think we recommend processes — as you imply, they're as contingent as the outcomes. What we do is try to share our experience, actual and hypothetical, in trying to cope with contingency in various situations. Sharing experience in the face of contingency. . . .

V 35 — Ah! I suddenly see the big picture — what we're trying to do with *A Place to Study*. It raises way too many questions to work through them here. But that can wait. Here it is! With the list of personages, each name indicates some lived experience in the recurrent human process of coping with contingency, and in our discussion now that list has simply been a metaphor for all the cultural content that might be gathered eventually on places to study, it all has to do with capturing the human effort to cope with the contingencies we face. With the idea of a canon, you are suggesting each of us as humans, a cultural species, each of us forms a set of principles in interaction with our distinctive, personal selection of cultural resources, continually developing our principles for making judgments, choices, about contingencies in our lives.

R 36 — Yes, well said. That's the big idea. And as an important part of it, we can and should concentrate on *my canon*, not THE canon, but my canon, as they way each of us partakes of the common heritage to form our own principles of judgment in our own, distinctive way. To encourage our doing that for ourselves and to make our experience available to others, we hope contributors to *A Place to Study* will present and examine their version of "My canon," to develop it explicitly. That should add to its value for the contributor and inspire other members and visitors to pay more attention to their canons in turn.

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*This dialog excerpt is a section of the dialog "Verbs," starting at V25 and roughly ending at R48. The topic of "recurring" has broad cultural significance that merits development as this text undergoes subsequent recursive revision (i.e., the topic of "rehearsing" below, V15ff). Over time, the dialogs may form a kind of conceptual latticework as parts of them intersect, appearing in several different dialogs.*

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## On Recursing

V 1 — I've been thinking further about verbs as the source of meaning and understanding, coming back to the matter. The relation between thinking and doing is pretty complicated. When I learned to drive there was a lot that I knew I was supposed to do, but thinking to myself, "use the turn signal," would get me in a muddle because I was also thinking to use the breaks and the steering wheel and each took some conscious attention. It wasn't until I had a little practice that they all fit together easily.

R 2 — Yes. Thinking too much about doing something while trying to do it can seriously impede one's effort. What's going on in the course of that practice? Good coaching helps us develop our awareness of possible adjustments and facilitates our actual incorporating them into our new efforts. We do that through a process of *recursion*, which arises as we incorporate the results of prior iterations of an action in successive iterations of it. Practice makes perfect through effective recursing, attending to what we are doing and successively incorporating possibilities into what we are doing as we judge them likely to lead to improvement or to avoid complications.

V 3 — OK, I'm beginning to grasp what you are after with all your interest in verbs. The successive instances of a repetitive action become recursive when insight gained from one instance becomes significant in the succeeding instance. We learn by doing as we make what we do recursive. But I had several teachers who would use repetition, drill and practice and memorization as a means of instruction far too much. And my mom keeps trying to have my little sister use a program of math exercises on her tablet that Sis hates because it is so boring.

R 4 — Yeah. For centuries, educators have warned against reliance on repetition and rote learning as instructional methods. But it keeps coming back, usually for the wrong reasons. It's the recursion, not the repetition, that counts. A teacher can tell a kid to repeat something, but he can't very well make the repetition recursive. That's something the kid has to do. A coach can point out a move that would become recursive if the kid incorporates it into his action, but the kid has to do the incorporating, he has to get the feel of it and integrate it into the active flow.

V 5 — The student has to take advantage of repeating something, noticing the effect of variations from one time to the next. For the most part, teachers don't generate or control recursion for others, each student does. A cook who doesn't try her own dishes won't become a master chef. I'm seeing this pretty clearly with that we actually do. Playing basketball, you see someone make a move and think "I could do that" and when the opportunity comes, you try it and mess it up, but sense why, and with a succession of clumsy trials it begins to work, and soon it becomes part of your game.

R 6 — I wish! But even when I could run, I was too short to have much of a game, as you say.

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V 7 — Well, I don't quite grasp the importance of thinking the verb that you seem to consider important.

R 8 — Right. I don't think your emulation of someone's basketball move is simply physical. You are there, caught flatfooted for an instant, and there is a spark of recognition — "I could do that" — and you feel what the move consists in and register it, and when you first try and mess it up, you adjust your feel of it mentally, rechoreographing it, and you put that adjusted feel in motion the next time you try. The recursion takes place through your inward processing of the action, consciously and unconsciously, in the interstices between successive occurrences of the action.

V 9 — Doesn't this have something to do with mirror neurons that cognitive scientists talk about?

R 10 — Something. I'm not well versed in cognitive science, but I think a little mystification arises in calling them *mirror* neurons. I'm pretty sure that what they do differs from the process of reflection that a mirror does even though there is some likeness comparing the results. What do the so-called mirror neurons do? I surmise — mind you, I'm not a researcher and I just reflect on it. . . — I surmise that these neurons, perhaps other neurons as well, process the initiation and anticipated feedback of different actions without actually carrying the actions out.

V 11 — Are you suggesting that the capacity to process the intellection involved in acting without carrying out the acting enables some sentient creatures to mirror other minds and engage in other forms of feeling and thinking? I can imagine that separation to be significant in many forms of cultural activity.

R 12 — Yes. I suspect the meaning of much of what takes place mentally arises through that separation. Language works as a means to bring it to consciousness. Our ability to direct our attention from one thing to another would suggest we are processing many different kinds of matters at once with them quite disengaged from our acting on them. Sleep seems to shut down many modes of action.

V 13 — Ah! You know how a well designed computer application will give you an indication that it is working when it is doing something slow in the background. I wonder whether fidgeting, a twitch or an itch, are such signals when certain feedback systems are idling with nothing to do.

R 14 — Interesting possibility. Like pinching yourself to make sure you are awake.

V 15 — OK. I'm seeing a little better the relation between thinking a verb and the possibility of recursion. In order to mentally grasp recursive possibilities, we have to be thinking the action of the relevant verb, sensing what we would do to adjust our acting in a fruitful way. As I *recurse* an action in my own mind, I gain the information and nuance to power recursion. By thinking how we do verbs indicates possibilities we incorporate into the next ... ah! ha! Can we say we *rehearse* them. We rehearse things, mentally and actively, in order to work on them recursively, uncovering their possibilities and working those into practice.

R 16 — Your jumping from recursing to rehearsing here points to something important. Both have to do with repetition, but the key thing in rehearsing involves repeating or reciting in an interpersonal setting. In some ways, recursing is more open ended than rehearsing. With a good director, the rehearsals of a play might become recursive, extending the script and its interpretation in performance. Recursion takes place when someone uses a function over and over again, each time incorporating possibilities disclosed through its prior activity.

V 17 — OK, outside of special settings like rehearsing a play, does recursion work open-endedly in daily life?

R 18 — When my grand daughter was two she wrapped her fist around a pencil, stabbed a sheet of paper with it, squiggled it around making a weird convoluted line, and looked up, mildly satisfied, and said "Bird." She's now 14 and has sketched many more birds and other things and become quite accomplished, largely self-taught, thinking about how and why the result of a sketch differed from what she wanted it to be and trying to incorporate that understanding into her next effort. She formed her artistic capacities by capturing a lot of feedback from her circumstances, employing it recursively in building up her skills.

V 19 — Yeah. Isn't this a lot like what John Dewey would talk about in *Democracy and Education* as learning through the reconstruction of experience?

R 20 — Yes, only we are attending more closely to the agent doing the recursing. You know from your computer course that a recursive function needs to be controlled effectively, especially calling it into operation and then terminating it at the right time in the right way. There is a big difference between programming the computer and living in the world, however. In the one you control the recursing for the computer, in the other your control it for yourself.

V 21 — Er.... Let me see if I really understand your point with respect to *A Place to Study*. I'm beginning to see that it's pretty radical. You're suggesting that in formal instruction it's difficult to make use of recursing because calling an action into operation, getting attention latched onto it through its operation, and then deciding when to stop it and moving onto something else is not really in the control of the teacher and the formal curriculum. Is that what you are suggesting?

R 22 — Yes. What does didactic thinking obsess over — arousing interest and maintaining attention in a group of persons. As sentient, living persons embodied in ourselves and the world around us, we cannot turn over to another full control of our awareness and concentration, our interest and attention. Now make no mistake. I don't think we can or should give up our systems of instruction, but in addition to those we can and should support a freer form of self-education, one that I think can capture the power of recursive self-development more effectively.

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# Participating

V and R puzzle over how operationally the pursuit of self-formation and liberal learning differ from the encyclopedic effort to provide an authoritative summary of knowledge about things. They discuss distinctions such as that between the letter and the spirit in Corinthians and between use value and exchange value in economics. They seek to differentiate, rather inconclusively, an autonomous participation in the pursuit of person understanding from the accumulation of impersonal knowledge about things encountered in the world.

V 1 — I've got a simple question. Unlike Wikipedia, you encourage original thinking here. People go to Wikipedia for information about this or that, but here they come to do something. But you know, on Wikipedia everyone can edit. The whole humongous thing has been created by its users, so people go there to do something too. Is there really a difference?

R 2 — I think so, even though there's much overlap. Here curators will do a good deal of collaborative, self-corrective editing in Wikipedia's sense—drafting, changing, correcting in the course of shared work. But much of what curators do here will be independent, creative work attributed to them personally. They will foster their own self-cultivation and liberal learning in public on the site. The consequences of this difference should become quite significant, greatly strengthening the aura of the curator.

V 3 — I'll take your word for it for now, but you would be more convincing if you explained more fully the difference between editing on Wikipedia and curating on *A Place to Study*.

R 4 — Well, you have just exemplified it by asking me to explain my expectation. Encyclopedia articles basically summarize what current authorities about any topic hold to be the state of knowledge about it. As such, the encyclopedia article is a well-known form and the challenge is to apply it to potential topics in an informative, accessible, and authoritative way. To everyone's surprise, Wikipedia has shown how crowd sourcing can create sound, full, clear articles, covering an unprecedented range of topics with superior if not perfect authority. Although here we also have to get our facts straight, we don't primarily generate authoritative summaries of knowledge on *A Place to Study*. Rather we select various cultural resources and exemplify and assess their potential use furthering self-formation and liberal learning.

V 5 — Uh, that helps a little, but consider an instance—the Wikipedia entry on cooking is all about selecting and preparing foodstuffs for consumption, affording people nutrition and pleasure. How's that different from writing about cultural resources for self-formation?

R 6 — Oops! I wasn't clear. We don't inform; we exemplify and present, authority comes from within the recipient. Curators here engage in self-formation and liberal learning and invite friends to partake in doing it with them. The point of view differs. An encyclopedia concerns the *state of knowledge* about things. A place to study manifests person's *state of mind* in thinking about oneself possibly doing things.

V 7 — Can you explain the significance of that difference? I understand that encyclopedias have to establish the authority of their articles in the minds of readers. In its early years, Wikipedia had a problem with that, but for the most part now its articles largely have ample authority for general use by most everyone.

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R 8 — Authority has always been highly problematic with respect to self-formation and liberal learning—"not of the letter, but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Critics have lampooned officious teachers of the liberal arts and anyone paying slavish attention to them since ancient times. The interaction between each person and their circumstances varies uniquely. Self-formation and liberal learning come about as persons foster them through their exercise of judgment, expression of taste, weighing purpose and conviction.

V 9 — So friends of the site shouldn't expect to get stuff from it on the authority of the site's contributors or through their adherence to explicit, well-designed guidelines. But what will they be getting? You are not Paul bringing a New Covenant to the Corinthians. Why shouldn't the curators and their friends just go off and do it all on their own?

R 10 — If I may, let's think about this question the other way around. Why should curators on the site—the persons generating the stuff here—come here to work and create stuff? It is a place for them to study and there won't be much of anything for others to come to get if the curators don't join up and do a lot of work here. Unlike the editors on Wikipedia, they are not aiming to collectively be authoritative on what they create. Why might people devote effort to creating stuff here?

V 11 — Hmm. . . . I think I see. It's fairly simple. They come here to study, to foster their self-formation and liberal learning in interaction with each other and visitors to the site, actual or hypothetical. In doing that, they may specifically do many different things, which others might find interesting, provocative, relevant, insightful, and on. But others won't or shouldn't find what the curators here do to be authoritative, for what they've done they did contingently, autonomously, on their own account. No one gets anything. They all partake in the interaction, even the cultural resources here are significant not in themselves, but in the interactions that persons have with them, here on the site, or anywhere else for that matter.

R 12 — Yes. Forming oneself and learning liberally is not something that happens by or through the cultural resources here; it takes place through what people do with the cultural resources, here and elsewhere. Starting with the curators here and what they study, the character and quality of their interactions with resources furthers their self-formation and liberal learning. Educators, people in general, put too much store on everyone engaging the same materials, this or that handful of "great" books, as if only certain materials have the power to cause illumination. We deepen and broaden our self-understanding and autonomous judgment by interacting across our differences in response, each distinctively, to a vast cornucopia of potentially illuminating opportunities.

V 13 — OK, let's get more concrete. *A Place to Study* uses MediaWiki and Wikipedia designed it to provide each account with a User pages. Will that feature be used distinctively on *A Place to Study*?

R 14 — I hope and expect it will. Editors on Wikipedia work anonymously, usually with pseudonyms. On *A Place to Study*, curators work under their actual names, and their User page should express who they are as actual persons. Each curator's first-person experience and view of life can and should enter into what he does on the site, how he interacts with others.

V 15 — Won't many people be uncomfortable working in public that way, showing drafts, work-in-progress, uncovering hopes, fears, and aspirations to friends, foes, and the great world of strangers?

R 16 — Yes, but a lot of the discomfort results from contingent conventions. Would you have thought 25 years ago, even less, that *billions* of people would have posted a detailed photographic record of their daily lives in the local newspaper? We will encourage curators to do something more interesting and valuable than that. Feelings of inhibition arise with awareness of any possibility, and we act despite trepidation to achieve the good we perceive the possibility might bring.

V 17 — OK, but please explain, perhaps with examples.

R 18 — Curators should think of their User pages of the primary locus for contributing to the site. We want people who join the site as curators to make a sustained commitment to it. Self-formation and liberal learning really go on through the whole of our lives. Although we don't charge subscription fees or subject users to a lot of advertising, we will ask that they commit effort to the site, effort that they value for its own sake. If no one feels that doing that in the company of others who are similarly engaging in self-formation and learning liberally has value for its own sake, the effort will fizzle.

V 19 — Hmm. I'm beginning to think that in the eyes of the person acting, doing something "for its own sake" means something close to "use value," as distinct from "exchange value," and that open source collaboration on the internet provides a way to pool use value with minimal attention to exchange value. A lot of food for thought there. . . .

R 20 — I agree, and we won't get to the bottom of it right here and now. But for now, I'd put it this way. Using the term "physics" very broadly, we can say that the physics of production and exchange in the material world, and the economics deriving from it, differ radically from the physics of production and exchange in the digital world. This difference gets obscured by imposing the legal arrangements developed for production and exchange in the material world on production and exchange arrangements in the digital world. But those legal principles have no standing in a timeless natural law, and bit by bit people will develop new principles to permit them to act effectively in the digital world. We contribute to that process by finding the interstices in which we can disclose unexpected possibilities of human activity in the digital world.

V 21 — So that's what you mean by *disclosing the commons*. We should think of *A Place to Study* as a probe trying to optimize the use value of self-formation and liberal learning, minimizing the ways the physics, the socioeconomic base of material production have conditioned those activities in the past.

R 22 — Well put! Let's see how far we can take it with that as a regulative principle for who does what, how and why on *A Place to Study*.

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# Persons, not individuals, A dialog

Persons live, or have lived, or will live; they have inner lives, they feel appetites and drives, they have emotions, they perceive, act, and direct themselves as best they can, coping imperfectly with real constraints; persons think and reason, they experience their world, they suffer, enjoy, fear, and hope. We can understand them because they and us, because we, all of us, are living or have lived concrete personal lives. A person lives in a historical, existential actuality as an "I" that inextricably includes both her "I" and her "circumstances." I cannot abstract my life from the circumstances in which my living takes place.

V 1 — Ah! Good! You know, I was getting a bit tired of so much attention to Verbs and Concepts, so much language. Glad to see some real people on the horizon.

R 2 — Well, don't forget that *verbs* indicate what persons do and *concepts* help them do it. But you sense correctly. *A Place to Study* aims to help us as persons, forming our personal capacities for living autonomously, by our own judgment. We better concentrate on persons as experiencing agents.

V 3 — And you'll be happy to know that I've been doing just that as I've poked around the worksite on my own, and I have some questions. I found your essay on *Formative Justice* and read some in the main part, which is pretty clear and interesting. I even looked a little at the "Annotations" which glimmer here and there, but mostly seem dense, covering your academic butt! One caught my attention a bit — "Persons, Not Individuals," at least the beginning paragraphs. Your description of the person is pretty clear, but I don't really get why you think the *person* differs so sharply from the individual. I've used them interchangeably, more often thinking about the *individual*.

R 4 — Both refer to one human. The *person* indicates more specifically this or that human, a whole, living human; the *individual* signifies a human in the abstract, an instance of the general category of human being. We can of course use the two terms interchangeably, but that muddies a useful distinction.

V 5 — How do you make the distinction work in practice?

R 6 — OK. Unfortunately, my wife and I live with it all too inescapably. Several years ago, she had a serious stroke with devastating effects: her balance is shot, she walks with great difficulty, and her left arm and hand are useless. Prior to the stroke, as an individual, she was in the lowest category of risk for having a stroke: her relevant indicators, compared to those of other individuals, put her in the cohort with the fewest strokes per 100,000 individuals. Yet she, one flesh and blood person, suffered one of the few strokes statistics predict a few members of her cohort will have. And as a person it was devastating for her. She didn't get 5 one-hundred-thousandths of a stroke; she got one stroke, whole and hard. Her low risk rating as an individual wasn't wrong, but it meant nothing to her as one of the very few persons in the cohort who actually do suffer a stroke. What researchers learn about us as individuals applies to each of us in the abstract; lived experience doesn't apply abstractly, however. It's very personal.

V 7 — Well, why then don't we just stop thinking about the abstract individual and deal only with particular, flesh and blood persons?

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R 8 — In very primitive circumstances, that's what people do, I suspect. But life as we know it wouldn't work without thinking about the anticipated behavior of the individual in various contexts.

V 9 — Do you mean, for instance, that I would have a hard time driving home from work if I had to judge what each person behind the wheel in other cars was going to do? I very rarely know anything about the persons driving other cars on the road around me. On the road, I'm thinking about other drivers as individuals, not as persons, making judgments about what I expect an abstract individual would do.

R 10 — Yes. You might assign one individual driver to a category of super-safe-pain-in-the-butt driver and another as a risky-fool driver and take that into account in interpreting what's happening around you on the road. But if there were an accident, the consequences would affect the persons involved and the risk category of individual drivers would be irrelevant — whatever those were, the accident took place; the effects were actual.

V 11 — But if we need to anticipate individual behaviors in many things, why do you exclaim, "Persons, not individuals!"?

R 12 — Important question. And it can get difficult, too. Why do you think that people get upset with police profiling?

V 13 — Well, I guess we've been talking about profiling in general. I imagine by compiling data about individuals committing crimes, the police can figure out that those with certain characteristics are more likely to commit a crime, say carry unregistered guns or sell dope or running it up the Interstate, and when they see individuals with these characteristics they may be extra inquisitive or even act preemptively.

R 14 — And why would that be hurtful?

V 15 — Well, most persons who might fit the targeted characteristics going up the Interstate are just folks on their way home, eager to get there, and the stop for no reason except how they look would be upsetting. And should the cop panic, thinking something dire, seeing them reach for their car papers/hand gun in the glove compartment, the consequences could be serious, final, radically unjust.

R 16 — Yeah. My profile is pretty benign, non-descript, but even so, I keep my car papers clipped to the sun vizor above the steering wheel. But most cops are pretty cool, experienced, and well-trained. I imagine the risk of things actually going crazy is pretty low. What's the cost to the individual wrongly stopped without incident?

V 17 — Uh.... Oh, I get it — it's not the individual who in fact gets stopped, but the person, and we would have to know more about the person to know whether the upset would be passed off with a repressed curse or in a continuing feeling of rejection, resentment, or despair, which could be reinforced if the person had repeated experiences like that or frequently heard of family and friends experiencing similar things.

R 18 — Yes, actions relative to categories of individuals have complex consequences for the persons caught up in the action. We get concerned about the misuse of profiling in law enforcement because it adversely affects many persons mistakenly singled out, but frankly I think law enforcement and the adjudication of criminal and civil law does a better job of concentrating on personal actions and consequences than many other large civic concerns. Techniques of manipulating individual behaviors have nearly destroyed our political institutions, which have rested on assumptions about the integrity of personal judgment on the part of citizens and their representatives in office. Political discourse egregiously ignores personal judgment and seeks only to shape individual behavior.

V 19 — Not only political life! People say we have a market economy, but really it is a marketed economy. And by the time people get out of the system of formal instruction, they are thoroughly inured to being treated as individuals, not persons. I went to a school that prided itself on "individualized" instruction, using portfolios and other techniques. But really it all amounted to ticking off a fuller set of individual characteristics than the typical standards-based program did, and in the end the complex assessment rubrics would keep us aligned with the overall system that we really were all inching through as abstract individuals, not persons.

R 20 — Don't get me started. I've struggled to make the person central to educational theory and practice through a long career. It won't happen in formal instruction, and formal instruction won't go away as one of the two or three great preoccupations of civilized life. That won't change. But when I exclaim — "Persons, not individuals!" — I'm seeking something in addition to formal instruction, educational activity that starts and ends, with and for persons, a matter through and through of self-education.

V 21 — I understand why that's important. But how can you carry through on it? I think lots of educators would like to work with students as persons, and students with teachers as persons, but they find it difficult to do so, almost impossible to do so consistently. Whether in the hall or in the classroom, every kid knows what role they have to play when. How's it going to be different on *A Place to Study*?

R 22 — That's a really important question, and I hope we're coming up with good answers to it. There's no guarantees. We think so-called personalized instruction fails to connect with the person because its practitioners do not locate control of the process correctly.

To be continued, perhaps on the screen; perhaps in your head. . . .

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# Predicaments

V 1 — People talk endlessly about *problems*, about *predicaments* not so much. What's the difference?

R 2 — Well, problems may be parts of predicaments that we have cut down to a simple causal problem to solve with a series of if-then propositions that work in a sequence.

V 3 — OK, but what is the predicament?

R 4 — It is hard to think about predicaments causally, for they arise as complicated conditions. A predicament is a condition that persists through the interaction of many situations, via linkages among them, that make the predicament self-sustaining because action on one part complicates the interactions in other parts.

V 5 — Sorry, but that's pretty abstract. Can you give an example?

R 6 — Let's take fire. People have been living with it for many generations, long before history started to be recorded, so many aspects of fire are pretty routine and we deal with them causally—"Here are the steps to build a campfire." But fires in the wild first confronted humans and many other animals with terrible predicaments, and they still do.

V 7 — Yeah, a friend's family lost their house in one of those fires last summer north of LA. Her parents were lucky to be safely evacuated. As you say, with problems we tend to look for causal solutions—problem, program, implementation. Can we do the same with full predicaments?

R 8 — I think that is a mistake, although a lot of that goes on, but it leads to action on symptoms that leave the sustaining interactions in operation. To get at those sustaining interactions, people need to develop a relatively sound theory of what is happening, and then they need a commitment to change patterns of behavior to channel and shape the processes underlying the predicament.

V 9 — Would the predicament of infectious epidemics illustrate what you are saying? Epidemics mystified people in pre-modern times. They would respond in useless ways, often destructive one, scapegoating minorities and the like. In the 19th century, they began to develop germ theory and map contagion. They slowly instituted good water and sanitation systems and changed behaviors against a lot of opposition. More recently people changed behavior with smoking. My grand dad describes how in college, he would smoke a French cigarette, "Galwaz," and everyone would get after him, not because they weren't smoking and he was, but because these cigarettes had an unpleasant, acrid smell!

R 10 — It's *Gauloises*. You have the point. To affect a predicament, people need a relatively sound understanding of the underlying interactions sustaining it, and then they need to generate a commitment to alter those interactions, which may be deeply ingrained in the fabric of life.

V 11 — With these examples, catastrophic fires and epidemics, natural processes largely sustain the underlying interactions. Is that always the case?

R 12 — Not at all. Humans have a role in those, and other predicaments arise almost completely through the complexities of human interaction. Consider the predicaments arising in civic life from the disruptive effects of social media. Where will those lead? Do we have an adequate understanding of what is taking place to grasp what sustains the disruptions. Those are bad enough, but

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then we have been making the really unprecedeted one—not nature making life difficult for humans, but humans changing the patterns of interaction in the natural world in ways we neither understand nor control.

V 13 — Oy! Almost a predicament of predicaments, multiple predicaments! Each makes it harder to grasp what we have to do to tamp down their sustaining behaviors. You're suggesting that we have to study here how self-development and liberal learning can support theorizing about these predicaments and perhaps disclose ways to stop sustaining them.

R 14 — Not *A Place to Study* alone, for the big predicaments have many complex sides to them. But a strong sense of self-command and autonomy in action have essential parts in generating the civic will to meet historic predicaments.

V 15 — I suspect you are right about that, but what you mean is not self-evident. Many people will hear it, some happily others, scornfully, as a reason to delay decisive action.

R 16 — Predicaments can induce significant forms of panic—some leap to do something, anything! right now, while others withdraw, preferring to avoid destabilizing the status quo.

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# Reasons to study

We organize the content on *A Place to Study* according to reasons that inwardly motivate study. With instructional goals, the young march through required steps, hoping on completion the right openings will greet them. In contrast, study meanders. Felt purposes guide it; we follow our sense of subjective importance and meaning. As the action of study changes our perception of its context, we alter its course. Variation marks the continuity of study. We don't have set goals, we *feel* our reasons to study.

V 1 — Glad to see you again, R. Since we talked about *A Place to Study* developing outside of the established educational system, I've been thinking about the reasons we have for using that system and wondering whether the reasons to study on *A Place to Study* differ from the getting formal education.

R 2 — Interesting. My short response — "Yes." But let's talk about why to be clear about the similarities and differences in them. Consider fingerprints, for instance. The patterns on the skin of each finger of a person are unique and differ from those of every other person, yet all fingerprints comprise faintly raised, curved ridges in the skin, whorls. To take clear impressions of a person's finger print, the FBI says to ink and rotate the fingers on the left hand against the surface to be imprinted in the reverse of the direction used with the fingers of the right hand. I think the situation with education is analogous.

V 3 — Ha! You turn a question into a puzzle! Let me see. Each person acquires a unique and different education. That's easy. The next is a bit more difficult. It's simply that in substance, education for any and every person comprises a working selection of the cultural achievements of humanity. The third is tricky. It's a bit fuzzy. An operation on one side corresponds to the reverse operation on the other side. It's the same operation but the processes are reversed.

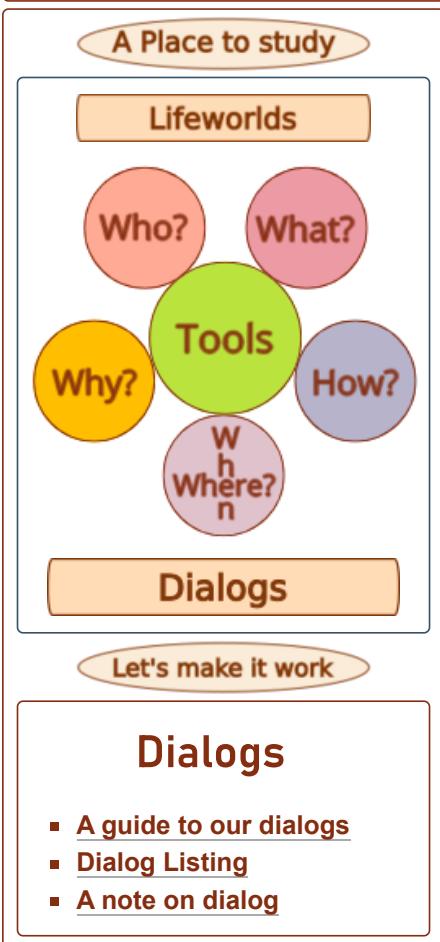
R 4 — You're on to something, I think. I almost got killed riding a bicycle in England. Nothing about the bicycle differed from what I was used to in New York, except that people drove on the left and not the right. I continually glanced the wrong way looking out for cars and pedestrians.

V 5 — Educational interactions have, I think, a similarity and difference like those arising from left-right symmetries, but with education we are not particularly aware the possibility of reversing the familiar order. Everything is left-right and it's almost impossible to find examples going right-left.

R 6 — I can't resist observing that partisanship hasn't gone quite so far that we think of education as a right to left process, but some on the right are beginning to talk that way and getting upset. But more seriously, we could look for a similar sort of symmetry with an internal boundary marking where one side becomes its opposite and the processes of an operation reverse or invert. Can we think of something like that in education? The structure, of course, would be much more complicated.

V 7 — I don't know about that. There's lots of instances of left-right organisms running around, but that doesn't make the relation of left and right in each all that complicated. There's also lots of educative interactions taking place, but that wouldn't necessarily, for instance, make the relation of outer and inner in each instance impossibly complicated. You know, if we are going to find something similar to this left-right inversion in educational interactions, we should look for it relation of the inner and the outer.

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R 8 — That's what I was thinking, too. I've spent a long career among education theorists and practitioners. All of them talk endlessly about the importance of getting a pupil or student to internalize what they are teaching.

V 9 — Yeah. And I can attest to how often students tune out, even the most dutiful ones, when a teacher churns on, locked to the lesson plan, when powerful questions, important and relevant, but off the preset trajectory, seethe in their heads.

R 10 — So educative interactions involve an out-inner symmetry between an outer world of cultural resources and the inner world of a student's intellectual and emotional life. But what are we going to do with the behaviorist who says we can't establish anything firmly about the inner — it's a black box to psychological science?

V 11 — Well, I'd say, "Bullshit! If you want to establish an academic specialty on that assumption, be my guest. But don't talk about education on its basis because the only phenomena you would admit are instances of conditioning and you have no grounds in expecting the rest of the world to follow you in confusing your specialty with the limits of intelligible experience."

R 12 — Whoa. Sorry. My question showed my age. I think educational interactions all take place across a boundary between inner and outer and believe we pay too little attention to the movements from inner to outer in reasoning about those interactions. When I was your age behaviorists were pretty imperialistic, looking only at the outside, and sometimes I forget how passé it's become. But I do worry that an implicit behaviorism still dominates the way we usually organize educational interactions, structuring them primarily as a movement from outer to inner. But let's leave that at least for now and discuss how people actually seem to reason about educational interactions in their experiential lives.

V 13 — Great. And I know just the way. My sister's starting to think about applying to college. I'm helping her through the process. I remember not so long ago being deluged with all the reasons to get a college education and how the school counselor tried to correlate our aspirations with what she divined about our interests, potentials and prospects. My friends and I tried too hard to preen how our value would appear in the admissions market. But I tell my sister to work hard to do well on the objective stuff and overall to present herself positively as the person she wants to be, not to slant how she might appear to suit what she thinks this or that college might want her to be. Apply, here I stand, to a spectrum of schools and see which accept her and then consider where she can make the most of herself with what those offer her.

R 14 — That's good advice, V. And by looking at what goes on in the college application process, we might understand better how the reasoning behind the dominant system of education differs from that shaping *A Place to Study*. But we really want *A Place to Study* to serve everyone relative to fulfillment for each, not only those succeeding well in the overall system. The college application process leaves a substantial part of the population on the sidelines.

V 15 — Possibly, but I think the fact that the process separates those who go on from those who do not itself indicates an important function of the K-12 education system. It is not as if those who go on to college have had one type of education, and those who don't, received an entirely different one. The whole system of K-12 provides a comprehensive initial sorting, separating those who will do well from those who won't, as the system gets both more demanding and more rewarding. Year-by-year, it reveals who adapts productively, and who does not, to pedagogical processes characteristic of whole system, seeming to legitimate leaving out a very large number of people from its full benefits.

R 16 — So you are saying that those who have not flourished in the current system of education have not been served well by the way it reasons about education and they may be those who can especially turn an alternative way of thinking about education to their interests and potentials. I suspect that might prove to be the case, although they may not be the first adopters of that alternative. They have more reason to be initially skeptical. But holding that in mind, let's look more closely at the college admissions process to see how people reason about educational interactions in the system of which it is a key nexus.

V 17 — OK. As my sister and I have talked about it, we've found the viewbooks particularly revealing. Most colleges send them out or put them online. They are often a bit over the top, written to impress the kids and their parents, the general public, too, and they reflect how the institutions want to appear to those who will interact with them. I've looked recently at quite a few and the one from Princeton especially impresses me. It touches all the bases. 18 brief sections show the well rounded Princeton experience — a one-of-a-kind place, freedom to explore, stretch your mind, amazing faculty, independent work, we support your success, an arts-infused campus; student stories; the look of dorms, a taste of dining, the tenor of campus life; worship, sports, travel, service: its all there with glossy pictures of young people, happily engaged in their activities, an occasional adult, a flow of short paragraphs staking claims, lists, and lots of mini-narratives exemplifying students doing what students like and want to do. My sister and I spent quite a while discussing it. Princeton's her top choice, but I cautioned her to be happy if it's a yes, but to move right along, head high, if it isn't.

R 18 — Tell me, if you can, how you would sum up the message that the viewbook puts across, taken as a whole?

V 19 — Sure. I went through it pretty carefully and came away thinking it was a masterpiece of branding. The cover points in vivid orange and black to "Experience Princeton" and typographical highlighting — black print on an orange background unified a compact publication, broken up by many headings, inserts, and pictures. University emblems frequently appear on the clothes of the students pictured. And the text hones in on explaining what will happen in the course of a Princeton education.

R 20 — Does the viewbook say much about the substance of that education?

V 21 — Quite a bit, in an interesting way. A full-page picture to the left shows two pairs of students on their way to class and the page to the right announces the theme, "Freedom to Explore." One lead sentence, set in large black print, underlined in orange, expands it — "At Princeton, you have the freedom to explore your intellectual interests and follow your passions." Next to it, a tight paragraph explains — "Any field you choose will teach you to think critically, solve problems, express yourself clearly, broaden your understanding of the human experience and prepare you for success in whatever path you take." The rest of the page pictures a group of intent students looking skyward, we might infer at the unseen flight of a soda-bottle rocket, like the ones several hold, or is it at a vision of themselves in the future, having risen to the commanding heights in their fields?

R 22 — Damn! What's that, about 50 words? It states remarkably what we expect should happen through a good education! But that's just the beginning, right? What do you make of the rest?

V 23 — It comes down a little from there, I think. The next 3 pages surprised me. I was ready for some pedagogical profundities, but they basically described the undergraduate degrees offered and listed the majors and certificate programs a student can choose among to get taught "to think critically, solve problems, express yourself clearly. . ." The rest of the viewbook basically describes in glowing terms

the range of things that will happen to students during their four years qualifying for the particular degree and certificate options they choose, should they apply and then get admitted.

R 24 — Can you sum up the overall impression the viewbook leaves one with?

V 25 — Sure, or rather my little sister did after we went through it. She said, "Well, that shows what the best education money can buy looks like, taking money to mean not only what Mom and Dad could pay, but what an incredible endowment earns, and what a high-powered research enterprise brings in through external funding. I wonder whether I'm cut out for it. I don't see how to figure out where I will fit, but it looks good to me."

R 26 — Were you able to help out on that perplexity?

V 27 — Not very well. It seems wherever you turn in the whole system, especially in higher education, whatever you choose "will teach you to think critically, solve problems, blah, blah, blah." It seems a kid needs to muddle through, figure out a spectrum of choices, strut the best they can and see where they end up, ready to, ready to work things as best they can, seeing things close up. A teacher of mine described it as learning to work the interstices.

R 28 — Often, that's what we do. Tell me, did the viewbook say much about liberal learning or the like?

V 29 — I don't recall that term in it. Occasionally, the text referred to the liberal arts as a program or characteristic of one, several times in quotations, even one by the university president. Uses of the phrase, "liberal arts," always implied that the meaning of the term was pretty clear, as in "we believe the arts are central to a liberal arts education no matter what you study," or something like that. It doesn't surprise me that you ask about liberal learning, but I'm curious — Why do you ask?

R 30 — Ah. In the tradition of liberal education, people have often talked about the importance of education for its own sake. People have difficulty clarifying what they mean by doing something for its own sake and yet they have found it important because they sense it has much to do with their humanity, with their freedom, their agency as self-directed persons.

V 31 — Well the viewbook includes things that one might say touch on a person's freedom and self-direction. It features how students have "the freedom to explore," the opportunity to choose among quality programs and options, and support to follow their passions. But I suspect these won't satisfy you.

R 32 — They are a start, but I smile. Eager young Princetonians might have second thoughts if the viewbook spelled out what "following your passion" might entail in full historical detail. Yet, despite overlays, the phrase harbors the core idea of liberal learning, for the threat of extreme tribulations and sufferings for the sake of something are what originally made the *passion* a good synonym for "doing it for its own sake." But you're right, I doubt what's in viewbooks these days will satisfy me. The externals of liberal learning are there in the system, hung painfully on tenterhooks, but the spirit of it has been bleached out.

V 33 — What can we do to recover the spirit of liberal learning in contemporary education and life? If we took the direct way, we would rejuvenate liberal learning within the existing system. But *A Place to Study* seems designed to avoid that. If I may say so, you need a viewbook to make that seem enticing.

R 34 — Well, I'm not sure making things enticing helps us do things for their own sake. We make things seem enticing by talking about the consequences they will bring — pleasure, wealth, power, prestige, all those other things for the sake of which we will do things we otherwise would not do, that is, things we would not do for their own sake. "Any field you choose will teach you [X, Y, and Z] and prepare you for success in whatever path you take." I've tried to care

for liberal learning within the system but have frankly found things that I and others do for the sake of pleasure, wealth, power, and prestige disrupt and deflect the liberal effort. Maybe others can do it better within the system, but I see an opportunity with the advent of digital communications to try an alternative that foregoes the enticements, the positive and negative incentives, and we will simply call it a place to study, rather than a place to educate, to differentiate it from the existing system.

V 35 — Ok, but let me then ask how you are going to differentiate a reason to do something for its own sake from a reason to do it for its extrinsic consequences? In lived life, won't intrinsic and extrinsic reasons always remain intertwined?

R 36 — You are right about the complexity of lived life and I do not claim that persons in a place to study have only intrinsic reasons for what they do and in a place to educate people act purely for extrinsic reasons. I think at this historic juncture, however, we have an unusual opportunity to try to create a powerful shared resource, open to all people at remarkably low cost, that foregoes most of the extrinsic incentives to educative effort characteristic of the place to educate. That effort will require a relatively low input of capital, financial and human, other than the digital infrastructure that is coming into place for reasons of its own dynamism.

V 37 — How will the reasoning in constructing this alternative differ from the reasoning through which the educational system has been designed and developed?

R 38 — That's the crux of the matter. We observed how Princeton presents what it offers prospective students through its viewbook and observed that what Princeton and a few other highly selective institutions offer is the top of the line, the line being the whole instructional system. People have designed and implemented that system so that, as the viewbook says, whatever field students choose, it will teach them to think, to solve problems, to express themselves, to broaden their understanding, and to prepare them for success in whatever path they take.

V 39 — Hmm. Yeah. I see. The rest of the viewbook provides an epitome of the design and implementations efforts that go into the whole system. It indicates the fields that students can choose as their own. It describes how they will be taught those fields. It boasts an amazing faculty that will do the teaching. It describes opportunities for independent work as the capstone of the instruction. It promises to support the success the student achieves. It shows how all that harmonizes with the arts, with campus life community, with spiritual observances, with sports, travel, and service to others.

R 40 — With the existing system, the problem of design and implementation concerns what will happen to and for the student by and in the educational institution. Such reasoning situates agency with the educational institutions and the persons who will carry out their programs of activity. The student cooperates with all that and does well as a result.

V 41 — Yet I keep having a doubt. It seems massively to be the case that agency starts with the educational institutions. They massively attest to their own primacy.

R 42 — As a student long ago I rebelled, quietly but adamantly, over who was the agent of my education, and I'm still at it. I don't think that education is something that happens to the young because of what their elders do. I think it is something that the young do to and for themselves with the cultural resources — parents, elders, and everything else — that they engage with in their surroundings. When we think about education as something that happens to the young, we think primarily about the consequences of what happens to them. If we thought about it as what the young do with the resources they find around them, we would pay much more attention to the dynamics of their actions. At any rate, on *A Place to Study*, we are going to try to shift that

around. In lived life, people often spontaneously feel that something is worth doing for its own sake. Here we will assume that that state of mind is primary, the initial case with matters of self-formation and liberal learning, something evident from the first moments of infancy on.

V 43 — OK. Let's keep seeing where it leads. By the primary or initial case, you mean, for instance, that it is the case that the infant feels good suckling, not that it suckles *because* it feels good? In a sequence of actions there must be a starting point that is what it is.

R 44 — Yes, and I think in educational interactions the inner life of each person, the active attempt to construe the chaos relative to the spark of vitality animating the living person, from infancy to death, constitutes that starting point. We lose sight of it and postulate the culture as the given basis of educational interaction and adults — parents, teachers, and bystanders — as the animating agents of it. And all the good and bad consequences that those agents promise provides the causal force inducing the animating spark to accept the cultural mold projected onto it.

V 45 — But surely you must have experienced times when you've at first doubted, from your inner awareness out, whether something is worthwhile, despite others touting it as necessary and good, but then on discussing it with another and learning more, you've become convinced it is, not only worth doing, but worth doing for its own sake. Isn't that an example of an authentic primacy of the outer? And given the inchoate character of the infant, child, and even the young adult, shouldn't such outwardly initiated experiences have substantial authority in educational interactions? Aren't you putting all that at risk in trying to build up a place to study?

R 46 — I'm aware that people might find it threatening, a challenge to the existing system. But that reaction exemplifies the one-sided weakness of the existing system. That system is huge and all things considered it does much good and it is not going to go away. The existing educational systems have an incredibly large historical mass. Let's go back to our beginning with left-right symmetries. Organizing cultural resources to support forms of inquiry and study that people can engage in because they find them worthwhile for their own sake won't somehow undercut existing educational efforts organized to make use of powerful extrinsic incentives. To fear that it will do so confuses how vital symmetries work.

V 47 — I'm not sure I follow what you mean with respect to how vital symmetries work. I get that operations on one side largely invert those on the other. But I think you are suggesting something about how they work together.

R 48 — Yes! *Together!* Together, these symmetries provide the basis for important capacities. Think of the one hand clapping. A great part of our daily activity depends on our ability to activate and control the inverted capacities of left and right together. My wife had a serious stroke that severely damaged the part of her brain that manages the motor control of her left side. It creates terrible disabilities. She can barely walk and you can't imagine how many things in daily life require two hands working through their inverted symmetry. She can hold a pen fine in her right hand but she has great difficulty writing on a sheet of paper because she can't hold the paper steady with her left while she writes with the right. Left and right work together as complimentary sets.

V 49 — So you are saying that an educational system that lopsidedly relies on external incentives to drive cultural resources from outer to inner won't realize the potential benefits that might be achieved through complementarity with an inner reaching out to external resources. I see clearly how left and right work as complements. What makes you think inner-outer are complementary in the same way?

R 50 — You don't let me get away with much, do you? Well, I've taught for nearly 60 years and throughout would rather have students who are self-starters, full of lively and unexpected questions than those who are docile, teachable in the sense of ready to soak up whatever I may say, able to regurgitate it on cue.

V 51 — But doesn't good teaching itself engender that liveliness of mind?

R 52 — It can certainly reinforce it. Good teaching is often expensive teaching — "Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other." To make incentivized education, outer-to-inner instruction, universal at a feasible cost requires grouping students in significant numbers per teacher, which biases instruction towards the routine. It is millions of persons working as teachers facing many million persons working as students, all managed by a complex bureaucratic system.

V 53 — Can you explain that some? I'm inclined to think it is indeed the case, but I suspect you can clarify why it is so better than I can.

R 54 — Persons shape their minds — their sensory, intellectual, emotional, and appetitive capacities — to monitor and manage what goes on around and within them. A key part of this process, especially the conscious level, concerns attention and concentration. We can say that we continually scan in attentive effort and through effortful will fix attention and hold it on something significant in an act of concentration.

V 55 — All this, you suggest, takes place on the primary, inner level. Something external might occur, but the inner attention singles it out and fixes and maintains attention, willing the concentration. I see the problem. The teacher gravitates to a sequence of short points, easy to grasp, voiced with considerable repetition, not recursive development. Docile students do better than those with highly active, strong willed powers of attention and concentration. We need to serve more effectively the inner power of attention and concentration possessed by each person in the course of education.

R 56 — You've got the thread. I'm going to take care of some other business. It has taken centuries to build up our programs of highly incentivized group recitation and I don't think the emergence of an alternative will have systemic effects any time soon. But I believe the current system under performs seriously, relative to human needs and potentials. Worst of all, the conditions of its operation systematically sell short the potentials of many persons it purports to serve, and worse, the mystique of it all leads them to a "disownership of themselves," selling themselves far too short as well, in their own eyes and in those of their peers, leading to a contagion of despair in the place of exuberant self-affirmation. We can and should do more.

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# The place

As we enter the place to study, let's pause in its entryway, to note the layout and the modes through which study takes place. An actual place is where ideas, potentialities, possibilities take place, where they come into the present, here and now, as lived experience. Often the immediacy of the place can mask the reach of the ideas embedded in it, especially with small beginnings. So here pause to note the ideas embedded in the place, before rushing up to engage their beginnings there. Let's open the door and imagine the place as an actual space, for that lends tangibility to its conception.

V 1 — Hey, R, get this wide corridor, SPURS TO STUDY on the left side and FOCI FOR STUDY to the right, with big doorways running down the corridor. I've peeked into CONCERNS here. It's large and rather bare. Are all the rooms the same? What takes place in them? Five on each side have labels, but there's more further on without any.

R 2 — Associates and visitors have all these spaces to study in. As we pursue our self-formation and liberal learning in them, the rooms will fill out with resources we find useful and commentaries on their meanings and value, but right now they have little in them because the initial construction is just finishing up and we haven't opened them yet. We've scattered a few samples in each room. In due course, associates really work out what they find worthy of their study and they might even decide to get rid of what's now there, although I'd be surprised if they did.

V 3 — So we have room for the five spurs and the five foci, but there are more doorways further down. What are those for?

R 4 — Remember, we are working here to disclose a commons to be shared by all, created by volunteered effort. The unmarked doors open to spaces that participants will define as their studies progress. Right now, it's empty workspace, needing to be defined.

V 5 — Hmm. Things look pretty solid here. The inscriptions over the doorways seem chiseled in stone. But I get the sense you expect ongoing changes as colleagues work and find they need to accommodate new possibilities and adapt established ones.

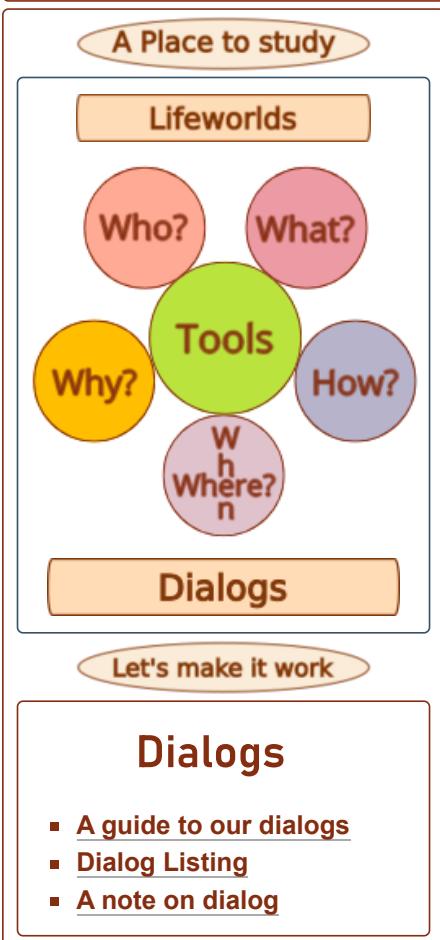
R 6 — Of course. Most of the place hasn't been built yet. It's just space. We have carved the inscriptions for the Spurs and Foci to last, however, not expecting their permanence, but recognizing that self-formation and liberal learning are highly continuous and develop in historical time, perhaps in units of full human lifetimes.

V 7 — Don't you think the Internet and all that comes with it have sped things up drastically? I'm not yet 25 and feel my expectations have repeatedly been upended before they've fully formed.

R 8 — That keeps happening, all too rapidly. We do estimate change and stability by how frequently we find unexpected developments force us to adapt our expectations, but I've come to suspect that that has more to do with historical churn, not historical change. Maybe the ease with which our expectations get upended does not tell us about the pace of change, but something else.

V 9 — What would that be?

This site is a project prototype, developed over several years ending in spring 2023. It remains online, open for reference, Read Only, with the comment links active for visitor input.



R 10 — Maybe the pace of historical change is a near constant. Maybe the variable is the stuff from which we form our expectations and the process through which we form them. As a result, the expectations might be poorly grounded and easily broken under strain.

V 11 — So you are suggesting that people may form more stable, resilient life expectations by attending in a sustained way to their self-formation and liberal learning and thereby judge their historical situation differently. That's a big hope!

R 12 — We've discussed how in the past only a few people have had real opportunities to study self-formation and liberal learning. Here we are building a digital space and in principle everyone can join in and participate. But we won't know who will do so until they volunteer themselves.

V 13 — Isn't that a little passive? Especially if we are talking about affecting how we judge our historical situation. You're sharing the digital world with powerful organizations that want to corral people's allegiance and attention, and have means with which to do it. They are driving how we form our life expectations. with immense power.

R 14 — Time will tell. How much of their power is substantial and how much a function of the lack of alternatives. People who calibrate their attention to the time of journalism, marketing, and politics may be oblivious to what is taking place on more extended time scales. In constructing a commons, in this case a place for all to study self-formation and liberal learning, we need to set in motion adaptive procedures that will permit unlimited inclusive growth while preserving the form and function of the place.

V 15 — Yeah. That's what you hope the *Symposia* over on the reflective side will facilitate, no? I'm curious how that will develop. But we're here where participants in the commons will engage in study. Tell me quickly how you have initially fitted out the rooms. Give me a quick run down on what you hope members will do here in the near future. Then I'll go check out the different rooms.

R 16 — OK. Let's concentrate on *Masterwork* as an instance of all of them. I'll indicate what's initially there, and why, and explain how we imagine associates might work with it and start building that room up. Then you can check out the other rooms and see what's in them to begin with and figure out how participants might work with it.

V 17 — Sounds good. I see the work of a few figures there. Those are the starter materials, I take it. It is pretty sparse. Among big thinkers, Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. Literary greats, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare. An artist, Leonardo. No surprises there. But it sees Wollstonecraft is the only woman!

R 18 — It's a bit embarrassing and we trust there will be many more. We don't want to get defensive about this initial set. It is here for illustration, without rational justification. Remember, this is a place to work in, to study, not simply a place to come and get something.

V 19 — In calling the room *Masterwork*, what are you implying about what users might expect to find in it? I don't think you mean to suggest that users will find here models that they should copy literally in living own lives.

R 20 — That's true. We think it is a good strategy in self-culture and liberal learning to get to know very well the work of one or more figures whom you've decided are really worthwhile, to know their work, not as a specialist in their thought, but as an appreciator, an amateur, in a strong sense, not a dabble, but someone who forms a strong, sustained involvement with the work. In that way, they become stable figures, personal resources, in our interior discourse. First off, users will find in the room the work of a selection of such figures.

V 21 — I'll ask — "Is that all?" — knowing that that is already quite a bit! But I suspect you are not just going to say, "Here. Go study!"

R 22 — One could do worse. But you are right. Suffice it for now to say that we want participants to add illuminating criticism and interpretation of the value and uses of each figure's work. And I must again add, criticism and interpretation, not as an impersonal specialist, but as an appreciator of it not afraid to bring out how the work affects his inward capacities for humane experience, good and bad.

V 23 — So we are not simply talking about what I see stashed in here. It is a place for the collaborative study of how bodies of work people might call Masterwork can serve as resources in a person's efforts at self-formation and liberal learning. I imagine that this basic function of the room is fairly fixed. But tell me more about what's going into it and why, and who thinks what about it. How will activity in the room develop?

R 24 — Well, we want participants to decide a lot of that. They should periodically set the number of figures featured as Masterworker on the Goldilocks principle — neither too many nor too few. Participants should adopt, and regularly revise, criteria for determining who to feature and collaboratively adjust the Masterwork room by together selecting from a much wider set of possibilities to whom they devote interpretive attention as well. Until participants have set the first round of criteria and made choices from the possibilities, one should take what's featured in the room merely as a working illustration.

V 25 — Got it! But the illustration includes some names I wonder about. For instance, Izaak Walton—who was he and why do you have him in there?

R 26 — Walton's an unusual 17th century character, remembered for *The Compleat Angler*, a charming dialogue about fishing first, then hunting, and some falconing — he grew it through many editions through his life. It's a book that one can keep coming back to. It is not only the great figures of literature, thought, and art who achieve masterworks.

V 27 — OK. And what about the Grimm Brothers. Why them?

R 28 — They were part of a movement in the late 18th and early 19th century, particularly in Germany, to collect folktales. They're a wonderful source —"Hansel and Gretel," "Cinderella," "Snow-white," The Golden Goose," and a couple hundred more. We don't really know at what age people might start in *A Place to Study*, and we are not waiting for Disney's versions to dribble out of copyright.

V 29 — So you are suggesting that "Masterwork" can take many shapes for many different people.

R 30 — Yes, strongly. Like the term "ecumenical," liberal learning should broaden out to encompass the learning "belonging to the whole world, universal, general, world-wide" that fosters autonomous judgment. Recently, [www.grimmmstories.com](http://www.grimmmstories.com) popped up in the digital commons with the full set of Grimm's tales in Danish, German, English, Spanish, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Chinese!

V 31 — Interesting. In addition to breadth of resources, what about their depth. You don't want lots of specialist scholarship, but what do you want. For instance, let's assume things get going and in a year or two Rousseau gets selected to be included here. What do you anticipate will be featured here by and about him?

R 32 — That's really up to participants to determine through what they choose to do. But I plan on participating by working on Rousseau myself. Here's what I'd like to see done. To begin with we should offer good digital editions of his work in French and English and maybe some of his works in other languages too. *Émile* is there now, but it should include his major works and some more

minor ones. We should develop a good guide into and through the enormous secondary literature on Rousseau, but being cutting edge in that is not the point. What we don't have so much now, here or elsewhere, is a body of critical and interpretive material on Rousseau from the point of view of self-cultivation and liberal learning. I'd like to join with other participants in developing that, a stimulating round-table on *Rousseau as educator*. And I hope to be hale and full witted long enough to do a really good study of his own self-formation — he did it his way!

V 33 — That gives me an initial sense of what would be happening here in the Masterwork room. I imagine I could get a explanation of what happens in other rooms by visiting them, but before I do that, Let me ask something different. I looked at my User area. In addition to space to work on *My canon* and *My project*, it has a space labeled *The place*, just like here, and it had what I might called alcoves, labeled in the same way as these rooms with one, like here, for *Masterwork*. What's the connection?

R 34 — Remember when I once noted that the participant's User areas would be integral parts of the whole site? What you are asking about now points to how that might work.

V 35 — So what I do in my Masterwork alcove will somehow hook to what happens in this big room here.

R 36 — Yeah. I'm glad you said "somehow." Like a lot around here, how to do that is an open question.

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V 1 — Yesterday at a party I got talking with someone about *A Place to Study*, going on about how it supports self-formation. She squinched her nose and said, "Sounds dated." I asked why and she went on about how *the self* has been put through the juicer and whatever solidity it once had — patriarchal, imperial, what-have-you — is now a drab, yucky liquid that only health nuts will drink. I excused myself to get another beer, but I'd like to hear what you have to say about casual and serious poo-pooing of self-talk.

R 2 — Well, I think it serves best as cocktail chatter and tenurable fodder, but let's see if we can get something worthwhile out of it, not dressed in any expertise, but a better sense of the self in everyday experience, the agent of my life. What would you have said if you didn't want another beer?

V 3 — I ducked responding, not for fear of the reaction so much, but because it's really hard to have something to say about the self, to know what one really thinks the self is. What she said confounded me. It likened the self to some object, I thought of an orange dropping into my blender to be whacked into a smoothie. I felt the self shouldn't get objectified that way but under the circumstances wasn't up to unraveling why. It's deeper than Jiminy Cricket

chattering on my shoulder. But I don't really have a clear and definite conception of the self, so I'm still at a loss for words.

R 4 — Let's see if we can find some words. Our cultures have lots of problematic identities etched into them — economic man, legal person, patriarchal male, and lots and lots of types, psychological, ethnic, class, gender, religious, intellectual. They are abstractions that bundle together a few descriptors of human characteristics as one or another *identity*.

V 5 — Yeah, and a lot of us worry about our identity — am I a *this* or a *that*? And none ever fit perfectly so we start developing more and more sub-identities. But a lot of people equate the self, their self and the selves they impute to other people, with these identities, one or another or some mix of them, and they even start to act in ways they think fit their chosen identity. But whenever I hear talk about identity, it feels a bit reductive to me.

R 6 — Same here. I think all the identities are abstract constructions, too simplistic to fit ordinary experience. Equating the self to an identity reduces us to an abstraction, but when my self speaks in living language I am not an abstraction acting; I am actual, manifesting my self-awareness as a living locus, perceiving and acting in and on circumstantial actualities.

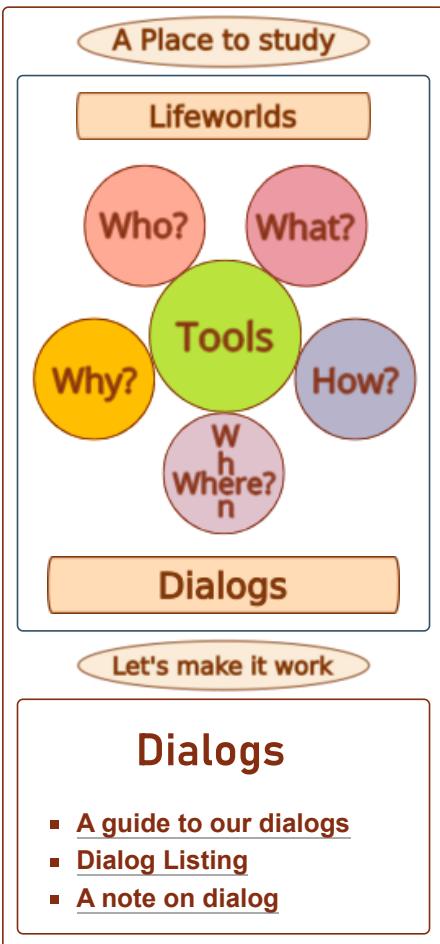
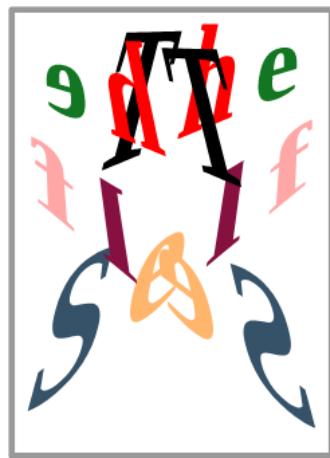
V 7 — What can we say about that living self, if we are not going to equate it to identities or other attributes? It seems to have become almost second nature. To speak about it entails objectifying it, letting go of its inner immediacy.

R 8 — Can we grasp any ideas why we think people, including ourselves, link their sense of themselves to an abstract identity?

V 9 — Well, we have lots of reasons, I suspect. Some of it is a little like being a fan of some celebrity — it lends us some charisma, at least among those who share the identity, and it is a quick way to communicate information about ourselves, and it may even give a person a sense of power, solidarity with those sharing the identity.

R 10 — How does this gain of charisma, imparting information, and acquisition of power take place? How does it happen?

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V 11 — Hmm. Interesting question. I'm not sure, but I think it must be that the identity goes through a kind of objectification in our mind and becomes a sort of entity that we link with examples of charisma, characteristics, and active accomplishments. Then, in saying, "I am an X," we couple ourselves to this entity, internally equating ourselves with its putative charisma, characteristics, and power.

R 12 — Why do you say *putative* charisma, characteristics, and power?

V 13 — Hah! You know, it's a cool word meaning *supposed* that I recently learned, and like to use. But seriously though, I think I'm using it correctly. Remember our saying that identities are abstractions, and I think that abstractions can help us think about lived experience, but I don't think they embody it. The abstraction doesn't really have charisma, characteristics, or power to impart to anyone who might equate themselves with the abstraction.

R 14 — So here we are thinking about *the self* as an abstraction that equates itself to other abstractions, gaining a fuller abstract identity thereby. That's the objectified self being dropped into your juicer. Is there a different way to think about *the self*, the "I" of ordinary speech?

V 15 — Well yes. The objectified self, the bearer of identities, doesn't really do anything — as you just put it, it's "being dropped." The whole scene implies another, different I, the I that is dropping the self/orange into the juicer. We don't know anything about the identities of that different I, but we do know what it is doing, it's dropping the objectified self into the juicer.

R 16 — Perhaps the juicer provides a mode of speaking about the reflective powers of the self-as-agent. We think about the self-as-object using the *copula*, a verb construction that couples the subject with an object stating an identity linking them — as you put it a moment ago, "I am an X." Most of the time in thinking, speaking, and writing, the copula does not suffice to state what is taking place adequately. We use substantial, active verbs, with respect to which the I, the self, initiates and does the action, the self-as-agent.

V 17 — Hey, thinking about it that way, my turning away, not answering, and getting another beer, may have been the perfect response, assuming the person I was talking with was reflective, asking herself what did my doing that suggest.

R 18 — As a great writer put it, "Where words fail him, deeds speak."<sup>[1]</sup> And good writing uses active verbs with the subject-as-agent. Substantive verbs tell us what the subject does, not what it is. And we use the copula, the verb *to be* or, too often. And we also use the passive voice, to equate the implicit subject of the proposition with some other object, state, or condition.

V 19 — Let me see if I get the distinction. The I of the substantive verb is conducting the action, doing something — "I'm driving my car." The I of the copula, equating itself with something, is in a state of being — "I am happy." The former continually changes in the flux of the action; the latter is stable, self-subsisting in the declared identity.

R 20 — Yes, but "I am happy" and the like presents a tricky case. It is part of the problem of the copula and the whole problem of *being* that comes with it. The I-as-object probably cannot be happy in a stable and enduring sense. It's more accurate to use the I-as-agent and say "I feel happy," concretizing the condition in an existential action. There are many ways that we conventionally speak of the I-as-object, when we could speak with greater clarity and significance by using the I-as-agent.

V 21 — Oh-Kay! I think I see a big one. In talking about self-formation, many people think about forming the attributes that make part of their identity. They think of the self as being this or that — a lawyer, smart, attractive, rich, caring, a leader, a good

## A Dialog

### Verbs

cook, and on and on. They prep the self for this or that role and worry what they need to do to get recognized for this or that acquirement. It's the formation of the self-as-object.

R 22 — Go on. Among such acquisitions are the trappings of a liberal education, and other badges of educational achievement, summed up in the proverbial "My son, the doctor." Is there another way to look at self-formation.

V 23 — You bet! It's forming the self-as-agent. That's what we mean by self-formation here on *A Place to Study*. It's not your acquirements, your certificates, not even the knowledge, *per se*, that you accumulated. It's what you can do and how you do it, particularly it's forming yourself as a person who judges wisely, acts prudently, thinks clearly, speaks intelligently, and lives virtuously.

R 24 — I agree, but if someone comes and asks us how we do that here, what are we going to say? If someone comes to the university admissions office and asks how they can acquire a Bachelor of Arts degree for their self-as-object, they will get a clear and definite answer. But how does the self-as-agent form herself as someone who acts prudently and lives virtuously?

V 25 — Hmm.... I see the problem. I didn't really understand it that well on reading Plato's *Protagoras*, but it was there. When we try to answer for the self-as-agent, we can do so only by treating the self as an object to be shaped this way or that, the recipient, when all is said and done, of an abstract encomium, you know, an empty sign of praise. Instead we really have to trust our selves-as-agent, embracing the question, seeking life-long to engage ourselves in answering it for ourselves. I guess that's why we call it *A Place to Study*. Here the self-as-agent studies for itself how it can best form its powers of agency in a world of circumstances.

R 26 — Yeah, you might say that we try to support one's self in one's making a room of one's own.

1. J. G. von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* Thomas Carlyle, trans., Book VII, Chapter IX, Indenture (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umrn.319510021319491&view=page&seq=366&skin=2021&q1=deeds%20speak>).

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# Toolshed

V 1 — Hey! Why call it a *toolshed*? What's out there is way-too-much for a toolshed! Look at one university's list of digital research guides (<https://library.columbia.edu/services/subject-guides.html>), about 250 by my count! You need something really big, an Amazon warehouse, to hold just a part of it all. I help a professor with his library and saw a book in it, *Too Much to Know*, and said to myself, "Yeah, that's the problem!" And you know what? I looked more closely at the subtitle—*Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*.<sup>[1]</sup> And the historian who wrote it starts the "modern age" around 1500. A *toolshed* isn't right.

R 2 — You'd be right ... if we were organizing tools so that everyone can thoroughly research whatever topic they want. But that's not exactly what we want to make possible.

V 3 — What do you mean? As I see it, when there is too much to know that forces people to specialize, to cut what each is going to know down to a size they can handle, and then they go off and do a lot of research, with the result that there's even more to know. It's like with traffic—too many cars, more highways; more highways, more cars.... Too much to know, more specialization; then more research, and on and on we go—you know!

R 4 — Well, if someone wants to advance their specialty, there are better resources than *A Place to Study*.

V 5 — Get real, man! I'm a junior and just finished the general education part of my collegiate education at a very selective institution. Tuition is very high, the faculty is all bucking to get ahead on specialized credentials and the students, insofar as they work at all, are also trying to slot themselves on one or another specialized track, and neither the academic libraries nor the scholarly publishers excel at packaging the resources for liberal learning so that anyone with the whim for it can take them all up at negligible cost.

R 6 — But research isn't every....

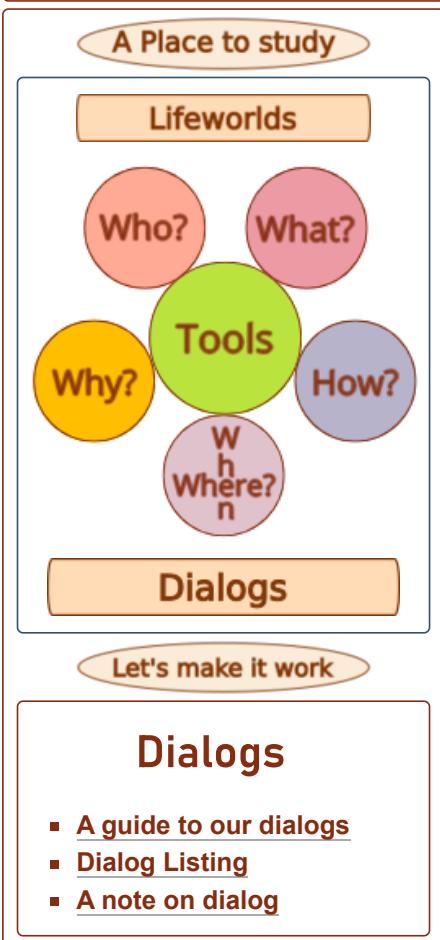
V 7 — No, don't tell me about what all the local libraries are doing, or the bookstores that are fast disappearing into the Amazonian maw. We have a good library where I grew up and they have a certain amount of good stuff, but their resources are spread thin keeping up with their users' tastes, driven by a marketplace that rewards ever-changing celebrity and novelty. Is that what you mean by "liberal learning?" Liberal learning is in trouble, caught between rampant specialization and commercial kow-towing to celebrity and novelty.

R 8 — OK. You point to a serious problem. Some exceptional local libraries exist here and there, but all the forces hollowing out liberal learning are real and powerful. Certainly if we want to be snarky about popular culture we can build a depressing case that it is disappearing fast—the people commodifying culture use their profits to push its commodification further while quality efforts pull back defensively, becoming more and more the esoteric holding of one or another over-privileged enclave.

V 9 — Now you're showing some realism. When your friend was talking about *sprezzatura*, saying the Internet could challenge the old elitism of liberal learning by making the resources for it accessible to all, I didn't speak up, but it struck me as way too optimistic.

R 10 — Yeah. I don't deny the problems. I've tried to cultivate liberal learning for 60 years now, and the prospects have become worse than when I began—students concentrate more on preparing for the marketplace, assessment of cultural worth becomes monetized, public discourse crasser and more

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fragmented, all the well-known laments. But we need to be careful not to make realism into a self-confirming prophecy. There is an important difference between prediction and possibility. Only a fool would now predict a flourishing of liberal learning. But if we care about something it's wise to act on its possibility, even if the predictions look bad. Are you going to do what you do not care about just because people predict it is more likely than what you do care about? That won't be good for your sense of fulfillment.

V 11 — You have a point there. We're agreed about the predictions—they look bad for liberal learning. But tell me more about the possibility. You know how a consumerist flak will say that celebrity culture is giving people exactly what they want. What makes you think liberal learning will interest anyone outside the small enclave already dedicated to it?

R 12 — Well people's inner taste and preferences interact with the options they find around them and for large numbers of people resources of liberal learning are very scarce and hard to activate in their surroundings. But to judge what's possible with interactive processes, we should start with a judgment about the primary ground of the interaction. Our cultural traditions mull every possible aspect of that judgment, but let's leave that aside and try to formulate for ourselves an approximation of the primary ground. You can, if you like, then use that as a point of reference in assessing all the arguments.

V 13 — Sounds good. It's always helpful to have a preliminary position, something to to test with and to be tested by, the case for other positions.

R 14 — Great. So let's look at kids as interact with their surroundings. Let's think especially from infancy through early childhood while their explorations are relatively unmediated, and to the degree we can let's think pretty much independent of class, ethnicity, religion, economic condition, social origin. What do you see them doing?

V 15 — Generally, they seem to reach out to things around them with zest, test things out, explore, ask questions, try new things and practice things they like, invent games, pretend, make pictures and sing songs, emote and express themselves, learn things, day dream. If I were to sum it up, I'd say that kids want to express themselves to others and hope, expect others to respond to what they do or say. It is their way of testing ideas and eliciting information and comment from their surroundings.

R 16 — I like the way you put it! I remember vividly how I once put my baby daughter down on a patch of soft, cool grass. She was just starting to crawl and spotted something bright orange down in the grass. She reached out quickly with surprising dexterity and almost had a small, wiggly salamander in her mouth to see, I think, what this interesting orange thing tasted like—she didn't really eat solids yet, but taste was a good way to know something about things. I agree that wanting to explore things and get to know them is primary for the very, very young. My daughter is now married and has a big family. What happens as the kids mature?

V 17 — Ha! That's us, you big time. The mature live more serious lives. We spend more effort, focused effort, meeting needs, our own and those of others close to us and some distance from us. We narrow what we do and deepen it some with acquired skills. We form routines and habits. We adopt more realistic expectations. Too often we settle into an existence that offers compensating values, but usually at the cost of our acquiescing to the stunting of many possibilities. The urge to express ourselves to others contracts and our response to others who express themselves to us also narrows.

R 18 — Well put as well. Do you think the expressive narrowing takes place inherently in growing older or does it happen largely through the force of constraining circumstances?

V 19 — Hmm. I'm not sure I get the question fully. Doesn't growing older and maturing bring a lot of constraining circumstances? the two go together.

R 20 — Yes, but it matters how we anchor the interaction. Remember how the other day you were telling me about *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes. I got a copy and it has deeply moved me. DeCarava's photographs and Hughes' character, Sister Mary Bradley, express the rich inner lives of persons who were mute and obscure in their narrowed enclave and make us want, impossibly, to express back to them our recognition that despite the distance of time and condition we come to feel their bonds of sympathy and community with opened eyes.

V 21 — OK. I'm beginning to see where to take a stand. The pictures and text reveal persons in their humanity, persons we would normally pass by, unperceived, or worse, perceived as some stereotype—as a social problem, a dangerous other, a threat to our complacent comfort. I guess you are going to ask why it took the collaboration of two great artists to make apparent the vitality of life in Harlem at that time. It's good to have great artists revealing that, but why does that seem necessary?

R 22 — You're right, that's something I question. The vitality actually pulsates in the lives lived, in all the lives we live, and why is it that each—poverty stricken residents of Harlem in the 1940s and 50s and all of us in more advantaged circumstances, wherever and whenever we live—so rarely manifest the strength of our inner lives to ourselves and to those to whom our inner lives remain invisible? I don't question the art of the few, but the muteness of the many.

V 23 — So you are going to suggest that the toolshed can somehow help make ordinary people, each in their own way, achieve more fulfilling lives through creative self-expression?

R 24 — Well, not without great caution. Poverty is a many-sided predicament and many aspects of that predicament may be more pressing in a material sense than the lack of opportunity for creative self-expression. A place to study won't overcome poverty, but it may be a part of the complex of activity that eventually does. Facebook has proven that a vanity publisher can preempt an astounding amount time and activity. Facebook, Twitter, and other instances of social software work by radically cutting back the affordances of tools for self-expression, putting the residue in easy-to-use packages.

V 25 — So ease of use won't matter for the toolshed?

R 26 — Don't leap to a mistaken conclusion! Good design has become rather ubiquitous. What sets programs apart is their scope and power relative to their controlling purpose. We will construct the toolshed by integrating free resources for supporting personal self-expression that have the maximum scope and power of use. We want to afford all persons free, open, and ongoing use of the tools for creative cultural expression suitable for attaining the highest levels of achievement.

V 27 — Sounds good, but you are going to run into some problems. For one, "suitable for attaining the highest levels of achievement" sounds mighty elitist.

R 28 — Yeah. Let's bite the bullet—*A Place to Study* will practice an elitist democratization. It is not an objectionable goal that everyone should have ongoing access to such resources. We should object to the way some of us have access to those tools, at least many of them, while most others do not. To work towards universal access, those who enjoy the access need to work to broaden it, not to apologize for it.

V 29 — I agree, but we will face criticism from those who distrust our intentions as disguised efforts to strengthen existing inequalities.

R 30 — True. I think we can meet that by offering up a start that makes a good faith effort to be inclusive and sets up procedures by which users can expand and reshape it according to their personal preferences and to further development of potential resources for incorporation in it. As you originally suggested, the initial toolshed will include many different resources, more on the scale of a large academic library, but it will facilitate open-ended personal use rather than more structured academic research.

V 31 — I'd like to hear more about that difference, but not now. I'm also curious about the initial procedures for managing its ongoing development, but I'm meeting friends for lunch and have to go. I hope the toolshed works—it sounds like something I could use.

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>>> Revise from here <<<

R 32 — I'm not sure what we can do. But DeCarava and Hughes both pursued dreams and faced circumstances that could easily have blocked their artistic development and left them as mute as their subjects. Generally, children avidly explore and acquire skills for creative self-expression. . . . Both of those [research libraries and public libraries] suffer from depersonalization. To resist the impersonal through the toolshed, consider how it arises in research and public libraries. An academic library serves researchers and students through many specialist collections of research resources. Impersonal criteria shape the different collections to support the topics, methods, and needs that those in each peer-group share in common. The researchers' divergent personal interests remain tangential or irrelevant.

V 33 — OK. The academic library serves the impersonal, professional interests of its users. What about the public library? Those seem to respond to the personal tastes of their patrons.

R 34 — Yes. Depending on their resources, public libraries offer a sampling of the broadly acceptable materials active in the marketplace, with patrons free to choose and to suggest according to their interests and tastes. Publishers and big producers of movies, games, and music—all the moguls of mass communications—will say that they are giving the public what it wants and only arrogant elitists will contest that. Impersonal criteria shape public libraries as they respond to the expressed personal interests of their patrons as those become commodified in the marketplace through influencers and celebrities, through formulaic repetition, identity norms, . Learning liberally primarily arises through the exercise of personal agency. The agency of every person interlaces with that of other persons, but it's interactive, not the one-way "influence" pushed out by a simulacrum shilling for some corporate organ. . . , but as you noted it is going to be copious, a cornucopia of many different resources, encompassing the resources appropriate to many different persons, different in age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, economic condition, religion, class background, and so on. So the toolshed needs to have great scope to span the interests of all its different users comfortably, fulfillingly for each. Yet it needs to have the feel and function, not of a giant warehouse, but of a familiar toolshed, the resources of which each can use as each sees fit over a sustained time soundly in the course of independent work that each chooses to follow. We build and equip such a toolshed by beginning, purposefully erecting it and by purposefully putting resources in it, continuing to do so as recursively as we can. As we go along, we will see what emerges.

V 35 — Well what were you saying about Gresham's Law not holding on the Internet. That sounds sort of like wishful thinking. If its a law its a law like in physics.

R 36 — But in physics, a law might lead to very different results depending on the conditions pertaining to its operation. Out in space neither you nor I would weigh much even though the law of gravitation would still be in effect.

V 37 — OK, but even if I work in cyberspace, I'm still here on earth and my weight doesn't change.

R 38 — But maybe the conditions that make good money drive out bad do.

V 39 — Oh. I've got to admit that I just sort of know what happens with Gresham's Law, not why, so I can't tell whether you're right or wrong in suggesting that it might not hold in cyberspace.

R 40 — You're not alone. I had to look it up, but I did and I think I'm right that it won't apply in a digital commons, at least not on a whole lot of good stuff.

V 41 — Are you going to explain or leave it to me to figure out myself whether you are right or wrong?

R 42 — How about I explain and then leave it to you to figure whether you agree or not?

>

V 43 — OK. Why does Gresham's Law work in the pre-digital world? It says that "bad money" drives out "good." What's meant by "good money" and "bad money" anyway? Isn't money money?

R 44 — The law comes from back in the day when they minted money from precious metals, gold and silver, really as alloy, a percentage of gold and another percentage of a cheap metal like nickel. Let's say "good money" had 50% gold and 50% nickel and had the face value of the weight of pure gold in it. So the king wants a big new chateau and his mint doesn't have enough coins and gold in his coffers to pay for all the materials and labor with good money. "What to worry," he says. "We'll mint new money with 40% gold and 60% nickel but keep the face value as it has always been with 50-50 coins." Everyone with a little scale can tell the new coins are "bad money" but the King is the King (as even "Republicans" say) and the bad money circulates as if it is good. Now you tell me why the bad money will "drive out" the good, which meant that those who had good 50-50 coins would stash them away and use bad 40-60 ones whenever they could.

V 45 — Well I imagine to get around the King's edict that the face value of good and bad are the same, tradespeople would raise prices rather than lower the face value of the coins and the lucky few who had lots of old 50-50 coins would hold on to them or maybe melt them down to get the gold in them. In theory for every 100 good coins they could get 120 bad coins with the same face value on each coin.

R 46 — Right on, well explained. Now explain to me why something similar would not happen with digitized cultural resources on the Internet.

V 47 — Unfair! You know it's a much more complicated situation. I'm not at all sure it would happen let alone confident I can explain why.

R 48 — Well, we can try to test whether the hoarding of high quality cultural resources has been happening with digitization and the Internet. Let's see what we can see with our own eyes.

V 49 — OK. But you need to show me! I use a lot of online stuff, but I know my university pays really big bucks for it all. I'm not sure how to make sense of it all.

R 50 — OK. Let's start with something fairly concrete. When I was a graduate student in the mid 1960s, I was interested, among other things, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I'd read *Emile* fairly carefully, a pretty big, complicated book, and was writing my dissertation, a fairly long one on something quite different. I was having trouble just handling the logistics of working with my manuscript. One evening I got to wondering how Rousseau did it with *Emile*. There were no

Xerox machines around in his time, not even carbon paper or typewriters. What did he send to the printer? Did he have a copy? How did the process work then? I spent an evening thinking it would be neat to find out and write a little article about it. I realized I'd have to find out what library held the manuscript, if any did, probably in Paris or Geneva. What would I have to do to get access, the manuscript must be in some kind of rare book collection, white gloves and all, and I wouldn't really have a strong reason to ask to consult it. I was only a graduate student who spoke miserable French, but I did (smile) read it pretty well, as long as the hand writing was pretty clear. And Paris or Geneva was a long ways away and flights were much more expensive then than now. So, after a short pipe dream my interest in Rousseau's manuscript evaporated and I got back to work on my own.

V 51 — So? I'm not sure what you are driving at. Are you suggesting that one-of-a-kind cultural resources are like the good money in Gresham's Law?

R 52 — Yes—very good money! More precisely the cultural resources are like the gold in the good money and in this case the frequency of access, a high rate of usage, is like the debasement of the coin with a high percentage of nickel in the alloy. Think what would happen if every Tom, Dick, and Harry could check the manuscript out, the one spilling coffee on it, the next slipping out a page to save time taking notes, and the last inserting a strategic "not" to prove his point! The elitist limitation of access to academic resources had its point.

V 53 — Why do you use the past tense? It's still hard to waltz into a rare book room and look at what ever you like.

R 54 — Oh! You should listen to Dylan more. Have your reader click mile this link (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8447158w/f5.double.r=%C3%A9mile%20%C3%A9>) and then come back here and tell us what she's seen.

V 55 — OK. Bev, please do as he sa.... .... \* Hey guys, guess what! It went right to the manuscript of Rousseau's *Émile*. The whole thing, three volumes digitized, is there, bound in kind of worn red leather, nice paper and pretty clear handwriting. The link goes to the beginning of Livre I, "*Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l'auteur des choses*....," all neatly legible, but then as the manuscript says, things decline from there at the hands of Rousseau—he liked to revise with all sorts of scratch outs and insertions.

V 56 — Huh, that's all it took, one click. Cool.... So how did you get permission to set that up?

R 57 — No permission. You just go to gallica.bnf.fr, search for "Rousseau, Jean-Jacques." That gives several hundred results and you put "Émile" in the "Refine box," which then offers 79 books and 5 manuscripts and a few other things. Click on "Manuscripts" *et voilà*. I went to the first page and saved the URL up at the top of my browser and inserted it into the link above—all in all a couple minutes.

V 58 — So anyone can do that whenever they want?

R 59 — 24/7 with a browser on the Internet. But let's go back to what we were saying about possibilities and predictions and your despair about specialization and commercialization. If Gresham's Law were in effect on the Internet, would your friend be able to do what she just did?

V 60 — Probably not. Access would be all the more difficult that you imagined it in the 60s. I think it was probably a stretch for a while for the librarians to allow the manuscript to be digitized. They would probably be cautious at first. Digitizing the manuscript is probably not as destructive as our Tom, Dick, and Harry would be, but it would involve a little wear and perhaps some tear. But once it's done the

manuscript would have a whole new life. The librarians would see that there is no reason to hide and horde it and they'd soon get a kick from sending perfect copies off to anywhere for next to nothing.

R 61 — Once they get over the threshold of resistance, they are ready to digitize a lot of good stuff. And what do you think persuaded the librarians to take the plunge on digitization?

V 62 — Well, in part they would have to realize that it was possible to do without humongous costs or a significant danger of harming the manuscripts. But I suspect the sense of its possibility alone would not have been enough.

R 63 — Yeah, but do you think pressure by specialists, serious Rousseau scholars, would do it? I don't. Rare book rooms have worked well enough in research libraries for many generations. Perhaps with easing access to many manuscripts and good but difficult to get books the range of people who might try to develop scholarly interests might change, but that is a kind of iffy anticipation likely to kick in after the change in their established behavior. What about pressure from the marketplace?

V 64 — Commercial publishers seem ambivalent about digitization. Is it a new market or a threatening destabilizer of established ones? I think marketplace pressures are at most a wash and possibly an impediment to digitization.

R 65 — I agree. For my money, if it weren't for some big corporations (looking at you Disney) wanting to keep perennial favorites under copyright, lots of intellectually interesting material with scant current commercial value would now be freely available. But it is tied up instead in copyright, which really inhibits many worthwhile uses of it.

V 66 — OK. Look, I'll grant that neither the marketplace nor the academic research imperatives will bring forth the toolshed or warehouse of formative resources that you want. Maybe people like Bev and I and you and others who just think it would be worth doing can put it together in the digital commons spontaneously. But you need to be clearer about what you want this toolshed to hold.

R 67 — Right. I've resisted the idea that it should serve academic research imperatives as that is something research universities are doing quite well and I think intellectual resources useful in learning liberally are quite different and they are different also from the goals of a community oriented public library. An academic research library works as a large collective enterprise. The disciplines and vectors of research of collective efforts with much more extensive resources in play than the more personal efforts at the base of learning liberally. To me, learning liberally primarily arises through the exercise of personal agency, although the agency of every person interlaces with that of other persons and organizations of many sorts. I think of the toolshed as something like a high-quality personal library, but as you noted it is going to be copious, a cornucopia of many different resources, encompassing the resources appropriate to many different persons, different in age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, economic condition, religion, class background, and so on. So the toolshed needs to have great scope able to span the interests of all its different users comfortably, fulfillingly for each. Yet it needs to have the feel and function, not of a giant warehouse, but of a familiar toolshed, the resources of which each can use as each sees fit over a sustained time soundly in the course of independent work that each chooses to follow. We build and equip such a toolshed by beginning, purposefully erecting it and by purposefully putting resources in it, continuing to do so as recursively as we can. As we go along, we will see what emerges. -->

- ▪ ▪ He asked something like, What happens if we organize in the digital commons the *best that's been thought and said* for persons — anywhere, any time — who want to learn, study, think, and educate?\*\*\*

1. Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

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Retrieved from "<https://www.learnliberally.org/w/index.php?title=Dialog/Toolshed&oldid=2779>"

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# We live by doing

- Verbs identify agents. They tell us *Who*.
- Verbs point out activity. They suggest *What*.
- Verbs indicate means. They describe *How*.
- Verbs locate happenings. They indicate *Where*.
- Verbs announce events. They state *When*.
- Verbs express intentions. They inform us *Why*.

V 1 — Why do you make a deal about verbs? When I want help doing something, I go to a "How-to-site." It's not hard to get the low down on just about anything on sites like [wikiHow](https://www.wikihow.com/Main-Page) (<https://www.wikihow.com/Main-Page>), [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com) (<https://www.youtube.com>) with all its videos to suit every interest, CNET's How To (<https://www.cnet.com/how-to>), LifeHacker (<https://lifehacker.com/tag/how-to>), or Smarter Living (<https://www.nytimes.com/section/smarter-living?pagetype=Homepage&action=click&module=Smarter%20Living>) on the *NY Times*, to name a few. Are you trying to compete with all that?

R 2 — No, not directly. Here we concentrate on verbs, on the specific forms of acting that each verb indicates. Through verbs we understand how and why we might act, or not act, in the course of life. It's not how-to, but choosing. By thinking about verbs, we develop our possibilities, we form ourselves, we learn liberally. Verbs! With verbs we clarify our life choices, we expand options, we strengthen our capacities to pursue them; with verbs we recognize ignorance, we note pitfalls, we correct mistakes, we overcome difficulties; with verbs we feed curiosity, we perceive opportunities; with verbs we improve judgment, we strengthen purpose, perhaps we even acquire some wisdom!

V 3 — Hey man. Stay tethered! You sound good, but so does a lot of hype. YouTube has more than enough talks telling us "How to find happiness everyday (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmYG2wryU3o20KVWrMqUeo5e4B-RvgEv->)!" Be real, and to use another verb, "Explain." What's up with verbs here?

R 4 — Got it. I'll state the basic idea and then we can explore the questions that I'm sure will follow. But I'll need your attention and cooperation in working with me.

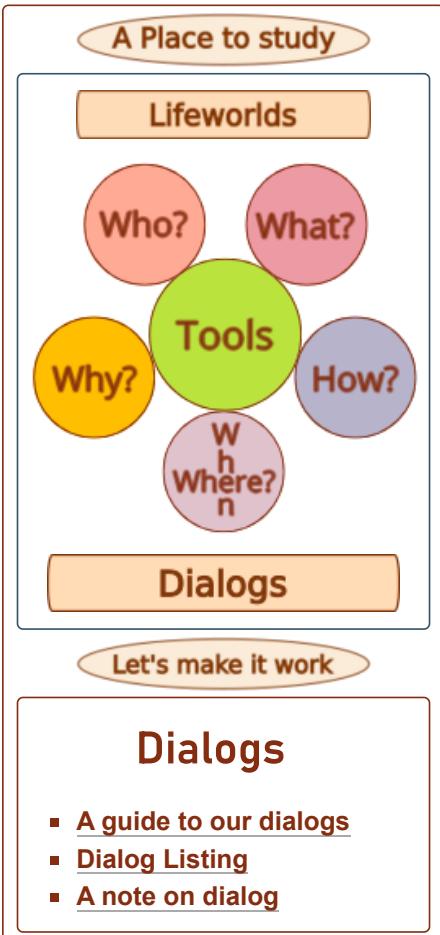
V 5 — Go to it! I'm the young one, ready to go!

File:Verbs.png

R 6 — Good. Here's the basic idea. *A Place to Study* is not a how-to site, nor an academic research site. We are a site for anyone anywhere concerned with their self-formation, anyone who senses their ignorance and feels curious in response, anyone who wants to cultivate their capacities for thoughtful, purposeful activity. We believe that all persons think and communicate in order to act in ways that they find meaningful and valuable. Verbs, which express our ways of acting, have a special importance in our thinking and communicating.

V 7 — May I interrupt? You talk here about thinking and acting, which we, as persons experience; it's my business; I'm the locus of it. You also talk about communicating, which involves interaction between two or more persons or organizations; it's a

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group business, so to speak; I'm one of several foci in it. How does the personal and the group relate?

R 8 — That's a big question! And an important one that I'll say just a little about. Note how your question just now turned our attention to something implicit in what I was saying. In my opinion, thinking and acting take place in and through each person, in and through each living being in some way appropriate to it, and the control of thinking and acting takes place through complex feedbacks, which scan a continuous flux of awareness — seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, moving — fixing attention and sustaining concentration on meaningful elements of the flux. I suspect that speech and gesture, interpersonal communication, start and build upon thinking and acting as a way to initiate and sustain shared attention, and that is really the function of language.

V 9 — That's interesting, but not entirely clear. If I hear you right, you are saying that language does not convey my actual thinking, but rather directs attention and awareness of context in a way that helps others at some preconscious, prelinguistic level to think the thought themselves, or thoughts pertinent to the object of attention. Why then are verbs so important?

R 10 — Nouns and other parts of speech identify, name, and describe matters of fact. They have less significance for how we attend to matters in thinking, feeling, and acting. Verbs pertain to what takes place in thinking, feeling, and acting. They direct and nuance attention; they indicate what's happening, what takes place, and thus convey the import, the meaning and value, of the eventuality. We communicate with language because we have shared capacities for what the verbs represent.

V 11 — Hmm.... What you say is interesting, but I sense you've left out some important steps in what you are trying to say. How will attending to verbs, words indicating different forms of thinking, feeling and acting, actually improve our capacities to do the form of doing indicated by the verb? You know the saying, "It's easier said than done." Don't you risk just helping people talk a good game?

Through her doing, a person creates meaning in her life.

R 12 — I hope not. But you are right to press on it. Here's where the distinction between teaching and coaching comes in. We don't want to have people just talk about different forms of doing that verbs indicate. We want to help sensitize people to think the actual feel and nuance of the acting. In talking about an action, you might say "I picked the cup up, but it slipped from my hand." But you can also think the action in your mind without executing it, thinking how you reached out somewhat inattentively, lightly grasping the handle at its edges so that it dropped as you raised it up. I've put that in words, but you can think it silently, feeling your inattention and imperfect grasping in your mind.

V 13 — I'm a little uncertain what you mean about thinking the action in my mind. Words about it get in the way a bit. Standing still, I can sort of feel how muscles will push hard when I try to walk real fast and it feels different if I call to mind walking slowly. Is that an example of what you mean?

R 14 — Yes. We do that a lot when we read silently, but noiselessly voicing the words in our minds, inwardly listening to them. We can do that with all sorts of actions — driving, grocery shopping, knitting a sweater, kicking a ball, addressing an audience. Speed reading teaches people not to vocalize in the mind and just to look for words, hopefully important ones, skipping along down the page. That's OK for slurping up information, but as a result the reader can really only talk *about* the text, having picked up what's covered in it. To think what the writer has said and how she has said it requires closer reading. We

really understand things much better by acting them out in our minds and we communicate real understanding by finding ways to get another to think for themselves in their own minds what we are saying.

**Meaning is not a noun, a substantive indicating a thing or concept.**

**Meaning, a gerund, takes place when the felt import of a verb effectively makes a sequence of words intelligible.**

V 15 — I hear you — but it may take a bit for it to sink in so I can think it for myself. But you were going to say something about teaching and coaching. Maybe that'll help.

R 16 — Right, it's important, but it's a bit complicated, so bear with me as I ask you some questions. To begin, what does good teaching do?

V 17 — It communicates information and knowledge and helps another understand it. Good teaching sometimes excites curiosity and it can even inspire someone occasionally, but I think that happens less through the teaching itself and more through some quality that an inspired student finds emanating from the teacher.

R 18 — Yeah. For now let's stick with the idea that good teaching communicates knowledge and promotes understanding of it. Now tell me what good coaching does. Is it the same as good teaching, or different in some way?

V 19 — I'd say that coaching involves some knowledge and understanding; there's a lot of how-to, good form, and the clever move involved. And there's a script or a game plan organizing things. But in the end, good coaching should lead to a person or team to playing well, performing at full potential. Ah! Let simply say — allowing a bit of fuzziness — that good teaching affects what others know and good coaching improves what they can do. Of course, teachers coach some and coaches teach some, but predominantly teaching involves knowing and coaching doing.

R 20 — Great! But what is really different?

V 21 — Huh. Will this end? In my experience — I don't think I've experienced either a really great teacher or great coach, but I've experienced pretty good ones — ... in my experience teaching is a kind of one-off process — as a student, you hear it and read it once and you're supposed to get it and then you move on. Sure, there're exercises with some stuff and sometimes review classes, but the teacher has a syllabus to cover. You're supposed to get it once — students with a good teacher get it once and get it, and move on, while students with a bad teacher get it once and don't get it, and move on. You see the difference in teaching in end-of-year exams. Coaching is more repetitive.

R 22 — How so?

V 23 — In place of a final exam, there's a succession of games or performances, and in between there are practices which are pretty much repetitions of repetitions. The coach says, "Do it again, but try it a bit more this way." Or, "Harder!" "Again!" "Faster!"

R 24 — OK, but tell me how all this repeating works. How do you get better from it?

V 25 — Well they say, "Practice makes perfect." But right. That doesn't hack it, does it? The relation between thinking and doing is pretty complicated. When I learned to drive there was a lot that I knew I was supposed to do, but thinking to myself, "use the turn signal," would get me in a muddle because I was also thinking to use the breaks and the steering wheel and each took some conscious attention. It wasn't until I had a little practice that they all fit together easily. How did that happen? How might practice make perfect? Can you tell me?

R 26 — Knowing, especially knowing that something is the case, really is a kind of one-off matter — you don't know it and once you know it, you know it. Doing something is different. Almost everything we do, we do many times. We take

many steps in walking and we walk many times in life. How many times have you breathed in and breathed out? But repetition isn't always the same thing one time after another. We can breathe deeply, or quickly, or hold our breath for a time. And we can think our repetitive actions and try out different ways of doing them in our heads and then actually try out a new twist, sometimes to good effect, other times bad.

V 27 — When you say we can think our repetitive actions, do you mean consciously thinking them or tacitly thinking them beneath the level of consciousness?

File:Recurising.png R 28 — Yes. Thinking too much about doing something while trying to do it can seriously impede one's effort.

Good coaching helps us develop our awareness of possible adjustments and facilitates our actual incorporating them into our new efforts. We do that through a process of *recursion*, which arises as we incorporate the results of prior iterations of an action in successive iterations of it. Practice makes perfect through effective recursing, attending to what we are doing and successively incorporating possibilities into what we are doing as we judge them likely to lead to improvement or to avoid complications.

V 29 — OK, I'm beginning to grasp what you are after with all your interest in verbs. The successive instances of a repetitive action become recursive when insight gained from one instance becomes significant in the succeeding instance. We learn by doing as we make what we do recursive. But I had several teachers who would use repetition, drill and practice and memorization as a means of instruction far too much. And my mom keeps trying to have my little sister use a program of math exercises on her tablet that Sis hates because it is so boring.

R 30 — Yeah. For centuries, educators have warned against reliance on repetition and rote learning as instructional methods. But it keeps coming back, usually for the wrong reasons. It's the recursion, not the repetition, that counts. A teacher can tell a kid to repeat something, but he can't very well make the repetition recursive. That's something the kid has to do. A coach can point out a move that would become recursive if the kid incorporates it into his action, but the kid has to do the incorporating, he has to get the feel of it and integrate it into the active flow.

V 31 — The student has to take advantage of repeating something, noticing the effect of variations from one time to the next. For the most part, teachers don't generate or control recursion for others, each student does. A cook who doesn't try her own dishes won't become a master chef. I'm seeing this pretty clearly with what we actually do. Playing basketball, you see someone make a move and think "I could do that" and when the opportunity comes, you try it and mess it up, but sense why, and with a succession of clumsy trials it begins to work, and soon it becomes part of your game.

R 32 — I wish! But even when I could run, I was too short to have much of a game, as you say.

V 33 — Well, I still don't quite grasp the importance of thinking the verb that you seem to consider important. I'm just out there trying to spin away from the guy blocking me.

R 34 — Right. I don't think your emulation of someone's basketball move is simply physical. You are there, feeling blocked, and there is a spark of recognition, a feeling — feint left at him, spin right, step clear to shoot — you sense in that instant how the move works and you try it, and when you first try and mess it up, you adjust your feel of it mentally, rechoreographing it, and you put that adjusted feel in motion on the court the next chance you have to try it. The recursion takes place through your inward processing of the action, consciously and unconsciously, in the interstices between successive occurrences of the action.

V 35 — Doesn't this have something to do with mirror neurons that cognitive scientists talk about?

R 36 — Something. I'm not well versed in cognitive science, but I think a little mystification arises in calling them *mirror* neurons. I'm pretty sure that what they do differs from the process of reflection that a mirror does even though there is some likeness comparing the results. What do the so-called mirror neurons do? I surmise — mind you, I'm not a researcher and just reflect on it — these neurons, perhaps other neurons as well, process the initiation and anticipated feedback of different actions without actually carrying the actions out.

V 37 — Are you suggesting that the capacity to process the intellection involved in acting without carrying out the acting enables some sentient creatures to mirror other minds and engage in other forms of feeling and thinking? I can imagine that separation to be significant in many forms of cultural activity.

R 38 — Yes. I suspect the meaning of much of what takes place mentally arises through that separation. Language works as a means to bring it to consciousness. Our ability to direct our attention from one thing to another would suggest we are processing many different kinds of matters at once with them quite disengaged from our acting on them. Sleep seems to shut down many modes of action.

V 39 — Ah! You know how a well designed program will give you an indication that it is working when it is doing something slow in the background. I wonder if fidgeting, a twitch or an itch, are such signals when certain feedback systems are idling with nothing to do.

R 40 — Interesting possibility. Like pinching yourself to make sure you are awake.

V 41 — OK. I'm seeing a little better the relation between thinking a verb and the possibility of recursion. In order to mentally grasp recursive possibilities, we have to be thinking the action of the relevant verb, sensing what we would do to adjust our acting in a fruitful way. As I *recurse* an action in my own mind, I gain the information and nuance to power recursion. By thinking how we do verbs indicates possibilities we incorporate into the next ... ah! ha! Can we say we *rehearse* them. We rehearse things, mentally and actively, in order to work on them recursively, uncovering their possibilities and working those into practice.

R 42 — Your jumping from recursing to rehearsing here points to something important. Both have to do with repetition, but the key thing in rehearsing involves repeating or reciting in an interpersonal setting. In some ways, recursing is more open ended than rehearsing. With a good director, the rehearsals of a play become recursive, extending the script and its interpretation in performance. Recursion takes place when someone uses a function over and over again, each time incorporating possibilities disclosed to them through its prior activity.

V 43 — OK, outside of special settings like rehearsing a play, does recursion work open-endedly in daily life?

R 44 — When my grand daughter was two she wrapped her fist around a pencil, stabbed a sheet of paper with it, squiggled it around making a weird convoluted line, and looked up, mildly satisfied, and said "Bird." She's now 14 and has sketched many more birds and other things and become quite accomplished, largely self-taught, thinking about how and why the result of a sketch differed from what she wanted it to be and trying to incorporate that understanding into her next effort. She formed her artistic capacities by capturing a lot of feedback from her circumstances, employing it recursively in building up her skills.

V 45 — Yeah. Isn't this a lot like what John Dewey would talk about in *Democracy and Education* as learning through the reconstruction of experience?

R 46 — Yes, only we are attending more closely to the agent doing the recursing. You know from your computer course that a recursive function needs to be controlled effectively, especially calling it into operation and then terminating it at the right time in the right way. Programming the computer and living in the world have similarities, but in the end differ, I think. In programming, you write and run recursive functions recursively, and in instructional educational settings something very similar seems to go on as teachers work through the curriculum and sequences of courses and classes, instructing their students. Instruction differs, however, because the instructor has little information about or control over the recursing the students are doing.

V 47 — Er.... Let me see if I really understand your point with respect to *A Place to Study*. I'm beginning to see that it's pretty radical. You're suggesting that in formal instruction it's difficult to make use of recursing because calling an action into operation, getting attention latched onto it through its operation, and then deciding when to stop it and moving onto something else is not really in the control of the teacher and the formal curriculum. Is that the limiting factor you hope *A Place to Study* will sidestep??

R 48 — Yes. What does didactic thinking obsess over — arousing interest and maintaining attention. As sentient, living persons, all of us embodied in ourselves and inextricably in the world around us, we cannot turn over to another actual control of our awareness and concentration, our interest and attention. The design of formal instruction postulates the plastic pupil who will manage his recursive effort according to the plan of instruction. All sorts of artless and artful incentives get deployed to get each actual pupil to perform according to plan. That works to a degree that varies immensely across the full range of actual students. At its best that degree falls far short of full human potential. We need to try an alternative system.

V 49 — Don't you mean that we need to complement the instructional system with another one that more effectively recognizes each person's control over their recursive development?

R 50 — Thanks. I don't want to overstep. I don't think we can or should give up our systems of instruction, but in addition to those we can and should support a freer form of self-education, one that I think can capture the power of recursive self-development more effectively.

V 51 — Well, let's not let our speculations stop merely with a glimpse of the goal. Contemplating it, we need to go back down to understand how actual students working with verbs on *A Place to Study* can manage their recursive self-formation.

R 52 — Fair enough. A Platonic bit shines through there. We would like users to reflect on the who, what, how, where & when, and how of acting in the ways that various verbs that catch their interest indicate. We hope they will reflect on them recursively in order to deepen and enlarge their capacities to use such modes of action in their lived experience. What we want to have happen here is more like coaching, than teaching, a kind of self-coaching.

V 53 — Can you fill out what you mean by that?

R 54 — Hmm. You know, V, I'm a little tired, a little old. We've been through some heavy stuff. We tend to think of "going back" as a movement from here to there, but it is just as well thought of as a sense of the direction. And what's the direction? It's somewhat paradoxical, going back, always looking for the recursive opportunity, the chance to expand perception and action by integrating new experience into it. *A Place to Study* gives us a place to

continually go back as visitors and as residents as students, as recursers, and filling it out isn't something you and I just do in words. It'll be what we, all of us, over years, decades, perhaps even centuries, do to build our capacities for human life recursively.

V 55 — I'm getting tired too, but you know, as we've been talking I've started to think that people pretty naturally have a recursive interest in verbs, more a natural interest in the ways of acting that the verbs indicate. Not mere, say, in playing catch with someone, throwing the ball back and forth, but in playing catch to think about throwing the ball. I really like trying things out and getting a sense I can do something that seemed beyond me.

R 56 — I agree. For instance, people are rather spontaneously curious about watching people working and playing. But although engaging, recursively mastering different ways of acting presents challenges. It seems to happen with progressive difficulty, first taking place almost automatically but then becoming more and more difficult to sustain — unpredictable, potentially repetitive in a boring kind of way, or overwhelmingly confusing as we see more and more things pertinent to what we are doing. Whatever the activity, a fair number of people seem to become passably competent, while very few achieve surpassing excellence, although from time to time a prodigy may appear, no one knowing quite how or why. Doing things together may push the recursion further and/or faster. We hope participants on the worksite will reflect on their self-coaching and tell us all what seems helpful and what a hindrance.

V 57 — This back and forth has given me a lot to think about. At first, I didn't understand very well how verbs could have special importance in thinking and communicating. What you said just seemed like a starting point, some words to begin with. But then as we talked back and forth and asked questions and had ideas and sort of thought about ourselves doing all that as we were doing it, I've started to recognize that that has been not just me engaging in talk about thinking, but in the course of it I've —, we've really been thinking some new thoughts and I feel them fitting together, making sense, and we've actually communicated some things with each other because we've been thinking them in our own minds, not just in words. I've heard talk about "the inner life," and this isn't that. In such talk, the phrase is too fixed. But as we've gone back and forth, we've lived inwardly and we've worked to understand each other, not perfectly or completely, but substantively. It takes work, but you know, I think I can think for myself in this way a little better, slowing down, experiencing silently in my mind the acting suggested by my words and the words you've said, working out what we might think and do in all that. I imagine I won't be able to hold it in mind all the time. I already feel all the outer stuff pressing back in on my reflections. But I expect we'll have other opportunities to get back into our heads, and when I do, I'll have more confidence in what's going on. And get more from it. Well, so long. Thanks. I'll be back. Let's keep building the inner life!

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# Why study historical persons?

Wherein R and V continue their discussion of how A Place to Study works. It is neither an encyclopedia nor a library. But what precisely is it?

R 1 — OK, spill it. When you found me up there by the list of Persons born before 1875, you were very worried. What's the problem?

V 2 — You said you were worried too. That's a long list. It's going to scare people. And it's going to get a lot longer. And I'll bet another, just as long, for *People born after 1874* will come soon, maybe it's already there. We've got to do something to break them up to a manageable scale.

R 3 — We will. Remember, these are master lists. Topical listings of different sorts will develop. It looks a bit daunting right now. I say, "Let it grow." That's not what's worrying me, right now.

V 4 — I hope you're right. I imagine you encountered somewhere the magical number seven, plus or minus two. Long lists overwhelm our working memory and I'll keep worrying until I see some topical chunks to work with. But you said you were worried too. What's your problem?

R 5 — Well, I'm worried and I'm not exactly sure why. I've been thinking about a place to study for a long time and over the years I've studied the life and work of few of the people on the list pretty well. It's seemed clear to me that a place to study needs to include all these people and more, but now that we have them here, at least nominally, I'm realizing I'm not exactly sure what we should be trying to do with each of them.

V 6 — Whoa! If you don't know, don't look at me! Now I'm really worried. The idea seemed simple — we are going to make a place to study each of them, separately and in relation each other, with lots of people studying them and kibitzing with each other. And I guess we'd add in for good measure "to study them and their significance for self-formation and liberal learning."

R 7 — That's the idea. But often it is easy to state an intent in words, thinking that by doing so you know what you need and mean to do. I started the list and set it up in chronological order with a link to the top page for each person on it and a link to the Wikipedia article about each person.

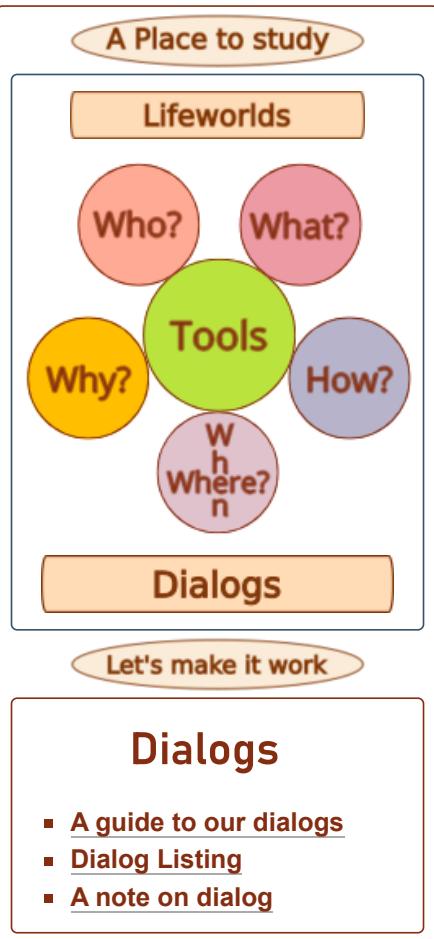
V 8 — Yes, and I looked at the cool way you made the table so that one can add information for additional persons easily, keeping everything in order. I can imagine how the page for each person will hold diverse discussions of them as they accumulate over time.

R 9 — Good. I'm glad you think the mechanics of it might work. But the mechanics don't worry me. Now that the time is finally coming when we are actually going to start putting substantive content on the site about some of these people, what are we going to say about them? That's what worries me.

V 10 — So you're saying it's not clear what it means to study the significance for self-formation and liberal learning through the life and work of other persons. I'm open to the idea that by interacting with the site and doing things on it people will be figuring out what that means. You like to talk about how perceptions and actions emerge. I can't imagine your wanting a checklist of to do's for each person to be filled out. Can you illustrate what's worrying you?

R 11 — I'll try. The list works as a start OK, and we put a draft of it up on the site and worked its basic mechanics out, and we can add further persons to it as we want. Well, I thought I'd add William Cobbett. I didn't know anything about

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him, but recently, a brief mention of him in an essay caught my attention. I read the Wikipedia entry on him, a pretty good survey of his life and work, and decided to add him. Then I decided to try drafting what might be a start on a top page for him. That's when a vague uneasiness became clearer.

V 12 — I don't know anything about Cobbett. What interested you and what got you worried?

R 13 — Well, I realized pretty quickly I had to check my first instincts to put up a lot of encyclopedic and bibliographic information about him. I th. . . .

V 14 — Wait! What's wrong with that? Doesn't *A Place to Study* have the mission to provide free, comprehensive resources to persons seeking to form themselves and acquire liberal learning in the digital commons? Shouldn't good encyclopedic and bibliographic information be among the the free, comprehensive resources we provide?

R 15 — Yes, but we need to do so respecting and nurturing the digital commons. *A Place to Study* is a small part of it. We've all grown up in acquisitive societies and often react with proprietary urges in situations where those are inappropriate. A good place to study is neither an encyclopedia nor a library although both are important in one. *A Place to Study* is becoming part of a complex intellectual ecology. Insofar as digital resources are actually digitally held in common everyplace, all the time, we should all take as our first task, not to provide resources, but to make them optimally useful, purposeful, effective within the whole commons.

V 16 — So you're implying that in the digital commons, the key thing is not competition, but fruitful cooperation.

R 17 — Yes. Of course, in cooperative efforts, people can and should disagree and have diverging interests and views. That's how cooperation gets fullness, force, and resilience. But the divergences share a common purpose and that's what puts a limit to them so that divergence pulls itself back as it starts to destabilize the whole effort. There's too much belief in competition for its own sake these days, which can destroy the cooperative spirit.

V 18 — OK. The digital commons has an intellectual ecology with different kinds of undertakings going on within it — academic and instructional institutions, libraries, museums, encyclopedic collections. *A Place to Study* is going to fit into that cooperatively as a distinctive part of the whole effort. We should use digital encyclopedias, not reacqpitulate them. But lets get back to Cobbett, that long list he's on, and the question of how we can and should deal with him and the others here on *A Place to Study*.

R 19 — Right. Let's keep our focus. I think in the ecology of the digital commons, there is a common purpose, to use the cultural resources of humanity as well as we can to promote human fulfillment for each and all. Now in that, distinctive forms of effort work towards that common purpose trying to stick to what for each is its proper business. Like academe, the library/museum, and the encyclopedia, our proper business potentially makes use of the whole of human culture, but we do that in our distinctive way, to support autonomous study by an open community of peers seeking self-formation and liberal learning. What is our proper business with someone like William Cobbett that would differentiate it, for instance, from an academic effort to advance knowledge about Parliamentary reform in 19th century England and from an encyclopedia effort to summarize for any and all the current state of knowledge about his life and work?

V 20 — Hey! You asking me? I'm the newbie around here. You've been at this for a long time. Let me in on what you've learned. Don't play dumb.

R 21 — Uh. Yeah. But you know, maybe you don't, when things are old and familiar you get comfortable and the reasons for things seem less clear. You're here for a purpose. Tell me why.

V 22 — Well. You know. Don't you remember. When we first talked I said a friend mentioned *A Place to Study* kind of in passing and I thought I'd check it out. I was curious, that's all.

R 23 — Great! And you've hung around — just curious, that's all? You go to Wikipedia, curious about something. You read the entry on it, maybe check out a link or two, and then split? Is your curiosity here the same?

V 24 — No. Wikipedia is great for information about anything and everything. I like that it is there, quick, full, and free — wherever, whenever I need it. But *A Place to Study* is closer to what we did in college, I think, but there is a difference although it is hard to state.

R 25 — Interesting. You went to a pretty good school, if I recall, and did well enough while enjoying the full experience. You get information from the encyclopedia. What do you get from college?

V 26 — Well you know we all scatter about in different majors and continue to get a lot of information, a whole lot. But — I'll try to state what's common in the experience; each is learning, beginning to learn, how to participate in the generation of knowledge, understanding that very broadly, covering the work of the professions, business, science, the arts and humanities. We get a grounding, in principle at least, in the way one or another branch of academic or professional knowledge poses its problems and generates its answers and tries to bring them to bear in the work of the world.

R 27 — Impressive. I recently encountered the purposes of a college education put with a bit more fuzz: "to help students cultivate the knowledge, skills and capacity for leading considered lives, to enable and encourage them to participate effectively in our democracy, and to pursue fulfillment in their professional and personal lives." You spoke of a difference between what colleges do and what goes on here. Can you pin it down?

V 28 — Hmm. A while ago, I wouldn't have thought so, but now I think I can. In college, the initiation into asking questions, generating responses, and applying them to the work of the world, primarily concerned the world. It was questions about the world and how it works — even in the humanities, it's about how critics explicate texts and generate interpretations of them. You observed that I was here for a purpose. Studying arises through the purposes of the person studying. Education tends to instruct persons in and for purposes that may or may not coincide with their own.

R 29 — Yeah. You've been lucky because your purposes have more or less intersected with those of our educational institutions. A lot of kids get left out and messed up when their purposes differ too much from those of their schools and their teachers presume. But tell me, how might the way you would deal with William Cobbett here on *A Place to Study*, assuming you wanted to do so, differ from how it would have been done in college?

V 30 — I've got to smirk. We got pretty good dealing with people about whom we knew next to nothing in college! But I think I can speak to your question. If I encountered him in a college course, I would probably use some knowledge about his biographical experience to illustrate the politics of Parliamentary reform as you mentioned in first talking about him. Here, I know just enough to observe that he was largely self-educated and I might take an interest in him to better understand my processes of self-formation. But that objectifies it too much and I think I need to talk about something else to make the difference clear.

R 31 — Good by me. It is always wise in making a fine distinction to do it with something where we are confident about our grounds.

V 32 — Well, I don't want to claim too much, but in one course I related well to Miguel Cervantes *Exemplary Novels*, a bunch of tales about late medieval life sometimes edgy, sometimes sappy. *Don Quixote* was too long to fit in the syllabus and a lot of the stuff we read in the course seemed a bit stiff and abstract. These stories were caricatures of life situations, often a bit unbelievable, but human, all too human. It wasn't goody-two-shoes.

#### Cervantes' Preface

R 33 — But doesn't the term identify someone or something that should serve as a model?

V 34 — Unh, yes, but the phrase "serve as a model" doesn't really mean much. How does it come to do that? Is it enough for me to tell you to take it as a model?

R 35 — Well a lot of people speak and act as if it should be enough.

V 36 — Yeah. And a lot of people know that that goes in one ear and out the other. Cervantes said the reader had to *extract* the model. Nothing in and of itself simply exists as an exemplary something. It becomes so when a person judges it exemplary in her experience of it.

R 37 — Might we say that through study, through self-formation and learning liberally, a person expands, deepens, and enriches what they judge exemplary in their experience?

V 38 — I think we are trying to say, better to think and to do that. But it is difficult. As Cervantes said, each person must judge for themselves, draw what they take to be exemplary in pageant of their own experience.

R 39 — That's right. But can we push it further by asking what sort of judgment is a person making in extracting exemplarity from some experience. Is it different from simply saying that one especially likes something — I like vanilla ice cream better when it is made with vanilla beans, not vanilla extract?

V 40 — Hmm. I think it is a little like a preference for vanilla bean ice cream. I'll stay away from brand names. That's all a bit too mundane, though. There's something more to it. I feel the preference stands for something.

R 41 — I think we are getting somewhere. There are lots of concepts — principles and maxims, abstract ideas with which we think about experience. These have names and definitions and standard modes of application. We can use them quite dispassionately in thinking about behavior as in discussing whether avarice or cupidity best describes the character of a particular politician. When we judge something exemplary, however, we feel it representing a concept while infusing the concept with valence, an emotive force, attractive or repulsive, so that in an appropriate situation the concept becomes an aspirational goal endowed with the power to shape what we do and seek to actualize or avoid.

V 42 — Hey, you know, this is going to help me understand something that started to bother me in college, even a bit before. We're all hit with lots of big problems in the news and in courses — climate change, principles of good governance, inequality, injustice, racism, authoritarianism, misogyny, a complacent sleaze among those we should be looking up to. We get to know a lot about all this stuff; we're informed, but most of us are inert. We have check-box opinions. Some become rabid fans of this faction or that, ready to cheer and demonstrate support, to confront the system, or better yet the fans of an opposing faction. Life becomes a big show. I think we need to discriminate between celebrity and exemplarity to get to something solid.

R 43 — I suspect you're right that we should distinguish between celebrity and exemplarity. Like exemplarity, celebrity seems to infuse principles and possibilities with emotive force, apparent as strong attraction or repulsion, yet I'd say there's a difference, difficult to pin point yet very important, or perhaps to speak more honestly from my subjectivity, celebrity makes me feel uncomfortable, raising feelings of caution, whereas exemplarity elicits a sense of confidence, a feeling of hope.

**"Exemplarity and aptness" (José Ortega y Gasset)**

V 44 — Well, I've got to say that slowly you've become an exemplar for me of respecting the wisdom of words. You've got the OED on your phone. Let's look the derivation of *celebrity* and *exemplar* up. I think that'll pin point the difference pretty well.

R 45 — OK. Here's celebrity, from the Latin, *celebritas*, a "state of being busy or crowded, festival, games or other celebration characterized by crowded conditions, reputation, renown, fame, frequency or commonness."

V 46 — See, it's a contagion, something that happens in a crowd; it gets induced in persons, independent of their personal judgment. What about *exemplarity*?

R 47 — For it we have to go back through *example*, which comes from *exemplum*, "sample, specimen, specimen of conduct, instance, deterrent, parallel, precedent, pattern, model, style, manner, mode, archetype, substance (of a letter or document), copy, reproduction, transcript."

V 48 — Great! For something to be taken as a sample, specimen, instance, or all the rest, the speaker has to make a judgment, "here is a sample of something significant." The speaker is not the victim of the contagion, but the agent of her judgment.

R 49 — Interesting. Our queasiness arises with the sense that moving judgment can arise for us through both considered reflection and through an infection from our circumstances. Now we've worked this our pretty slowly, step by step. I fear if we keep this pace, we'll be here all day and into the night. Let's try to shift gears to go a little faster. What does our recognition of the difference between celebrity and exemplarity have to do with our original question, why study historical persons?

V 50 — Well, if I can use of big word, historicity works like the masks we learned to use in during the Covid plague. It filters out much, not all, that induces contagion. You might almost say that it is the same people who don't get the value of masks and don't appreciate the uses of history. But at any rate, history gives us the opportunity to think about human agency, observing and making judgments about specimens of conduct, instances, deterrents, parallels, precedents, patterns, models, styles, manners, modes, archetypes, substances.

R 51 — Good. I see that. But if I remember correctly, we got to the idea of exemplarity when you noted how our experiential world is sort of deficient in it, partly by blanketed by so our getting infected by feelings of celebrity about so many things in so many ways. But I had the sense that you also found it hard to recognize exemplars in our cultural experience. Am I wrong?

V 52 — No. You know, in college I had the freshman/sophomore initiation into contemporary civilization and then I majored in European history and took a number of courses in literature. And it's only now, stumbling onto *A Place to Study* that I'm thinking that I might have done more with those opportunities. But truthfully, I'm thinking that study here involves a mode of inquiry and reflection that I didn't encounter much in college. I don't think it particularly help me to form judgments of exemplarity.

R 53 — Well, I won't say that that's your fault. But I'm curious whether you have any ideas it didn't help?

V 54 — Yeah, I do. But it is going to sound a little strange. Looking back, I think my formal education, and the whole setting in which it occurred, made lousy use of my ignorance. It is a great big collective effort to propagate a pretension to knowledge.

R 55 — Interesting, but what does this have to do with why we might study historical persons? And why your courses in European history and the like seem to you to have missed the mark?

V 56 — Well, basically, my encounter with "history" was like peeling an onion, successive layers of detail and complexity addressing what happened and why. In the modes of scholarly history the narrative of what happened and why have become very abstract. What does the phrase, "the subject of history" mean to you? Let's stop there. What do you think it could mean? What should it mean?

"the idea I have of innocence" (Albert Camus)

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# With a digital pedagogy

Existing educational institutions use a pedagogy deeply conditioned by the mechanical techniques of organization and communication developed through the modern era. The constraints and possibilities of digital techniques differ markedly from the mechanical. Most educational uses of digital technologies employ them to marginally improve mechanistic educational systems. To initiate and develop a digital pedagogy, we start by setting aside familiar educational forms and begin to develop a different set of principles to serve our human purposes.

V 1 — What's with a *digital pedagogy*? Earlier, you were telling us how you want to use digital technologies to facilitate self-formation and liberal learning independent of existing systems of formal education. That still strikes me as a bit odd.

R 2 — How so? *A Place to Study* works to facilitate persons' efforts at self-formation and liberal learning in interaction with the culture and with other persons. We think that our formal educational systems with all their learning objectives, instructional programs, and assessment techniques often get in the way of that. So we are creating *A Place to Study* as an alternative, open freely for use by anyone, doing so in the digital commons through the activity of collaborating volunteers.

V 3 — Yeah, I get that and think it'll be great if you pull it off. But why then talk of a *digital pedagogy*? I'm sure you know that to most people, "pedagogy" means "the art or science of teaching; especially, instruction in teaching methods," or something like that. If you are going outside the systems of formal instruction, you should stop talking about pedagogy!

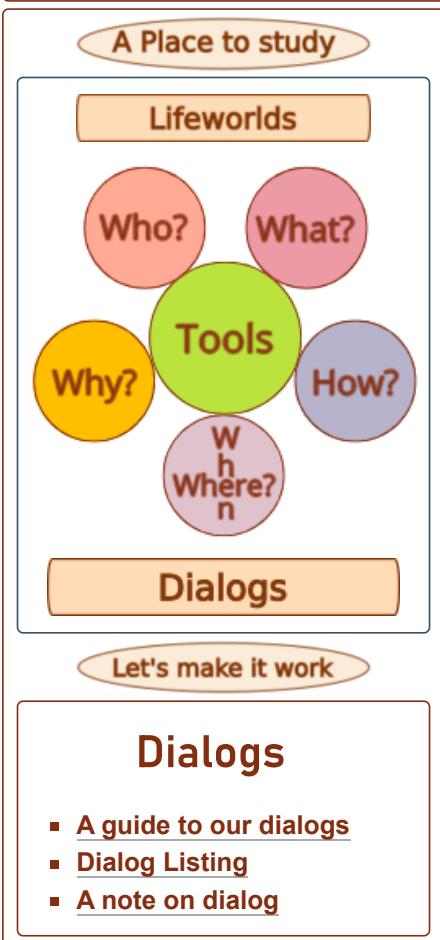
R 4 — Ow! You know how to find the sore spot of an old romantic! You're sort of right about "pedagogy," but I feel stuck with it and am determined to make the best of it. Sometimes trying to change usage may be worthwhile. Early in my career, educators didn't talk much about "pedagogy." They liked to gussy things up with the "science of education." I tried to latch on to "pedagogy" as a key term, inspired by a humane German thinker—"the blossom and goal of all true philosophy is pedagogy in its widest sense, the formative theory of humanity."<sup>[1]</sup> A stubborn buzzard: that's what I still mean by *pedagogy* here.

V 5 — OK, if you insist. But educational sites are all over the Internet. I've looked at MOOCs—*Coursera* (<https://www.coursera.org/browse>), *Udacity* (<https://www.udacity.com/>), and *edX* (<https://www.edx.org/course>). They're digital and don't look like *A Place to Study*, but much more like the sites for regular colleges and universities, filled with information on their programs and courses. You don't seem to think that they are really *digital*.

R 6 — That's right. The MOOCs are digital in one sense, all online, but they are not digital in another. They look like regular academic sites because of that C at the end of MOOC, which stands for *course*. For several centuries, the course has served as the building block of traditional print-based pedagogy.

V 7 — So you're claiming that the MOOC consortia simply extend online the traditional educational pedagogies, while you're doing something different. I can see how their courses and programs look a lot like more traditional institutions—basically the same-old with some digital efficiencies. It's new media delivering a well-established product more flexibly, efficiently, and effectively. And I have to say

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that the pandemic may have confirmed the flexibility claim, but listening to my friends who were still in school, the coronavirus has put the efficient and effective claim deeply into question.

R 8 — Right. *A Place to Study* doesn't offer online programs or courses. We don't have schools, divisions, or departments. *A Place to Study* organizes and delivers opportunities for self-formation and liberal learning differently, by making more integral use of the intellectual potentialities of digital communications.

V 9 — I hear your claim, but can't say I understand yet. I'm curious how earlier technologies like printing shaped the existing setup, but let's save that for some other time. Instead, help me understand how *A Place to Study* uses digital communications to construct a different pedagogy. Maybe begin by explaining why you describe your pedagogy simply as *different*, rather than as *new or novel*. "Different" is pretty low-keyed.

R 10 — Let's not get in a muddle over what's old, what's new, and what's different. Broadly, there's a conventional pedagogy of formal instruction, historically related to a system of communications based on printed text. Important, powerful innovations have been taking place in the system of communications, which in my opinion are radically new in an historically meaningful sense. These are making possible pedagogical arrangements—arrangements for humanity's self-formative activities—that are significantly different from the conventional ones of formal instruction. *A Place to Study* tries to prototype such different arrangements, a digital pedagogy.

V 11 — As I suspected, you're using "digital" in a special way. Most people think digital tools are extending earlier means of communication, disrupting them a good deal by altering patterns of use. We use all sorts of metaphorical extension to describe what happening as we *browse* sites like your's on our *notebooks*.

R 12 — It seems that way, but I think we need to look at what is taking place more closely. Let's get in mind the whole digital system, cyberspace—the Internet, all the broadcast and narrowcast spectra, the routers sending everything here and there, all the drives storing and retrieving, the cloud and its warehouses of CPUs, and all the devices—desktops, notebooks, smartphones, game consoles, displays, speakers, TVs, and on. Then get the traditional media of the culture in mind—the books, magazines, newspapers, posters, scores, blueprints, maps; the libraries, bookstores, publishing houses, offices filed with files, archives, museums, and on. What's the point of similarity?

V 13 — Well, first off, a lot of the same stuff is in both systems, but I think it is probably better to say that human persons, people, continuously seek to create cultural resources of meaning and importance to them and they adapt those the media at hand to communicate those resources with each other. Our cultural resources have a human side—an enduring human purpose, interest, and content—and an externally conditioned side engendered by the available media of communication.

R 14 — That's well put, but now the harder question. What's basically different between the two systems?

V 15 — Yeah. I could describe endless differences in the way the two work, noting what the different parts do and don't do well, but I suspect that would not be general enough for you. Basically, you know, they work differently, but I'm not sure how to put the difference clearly into words.

R 16 — Right. It's difficult. I'd put it this way—both systems allow people to create, record, store, retrieve, transmit, and transform humanly valuable cultural resources in useful ways, but in the traditional system people encode

the resources in states of matter—ink on a page or paint on a canvas. In the innovative systems they encode cultural resources in states of energy.

V 17 — That certainly gets at a radical difference. We might have to recognize that even in cyberspace we work culturally with works encoded in energy through material artifacts—screens, keyboards, chips, disks, wires—but in their active state, as we interact with them, the works are encoded in states of energy. Clearly the switch from material coding to electronic might alter significantly the affordances and constraints in creating, recording, storing, retrieving, transmitting, and transforming cultural resources. Those changes make the new media new. They code in electronic states, not material.

R 18 — I quibble a bit with myself at the margins of this distinction—speech and music use sound, for instance. And we frequently now we mix the two systems as we do in word processing a paper. But I think it fair to say that the new media are new and not merely an extension of the old media because they use a radically different way of coding our cultural resources, which brings with it radically different possibilities.

V 19 — That makes sense to me as you explain it, but I don't see clearly where you're going with this difference. In practice, aren't we mashing up the two systems all together?

R 20 — Pretty much so far, largely by cultural inertia. But there's art to a music mash up, and even done well, it may not really improve the originals. With digital technologies all we have are mash ups. Let's go beyond the mash up and figure out what a digital pedagogy can be like. To do that, we need to distinguish between the human components of our cultural resources from the artifactual components, and then see how we can use new media to facilitate those human components.

V 21 — Slower. The human/artifactual distinction sounds interesting, but an example would help!

R 22 — Fair enough. The distinction is fuzzy. Cultural resources have a primary incarnation, the work as created by its author, and then secondary ones, the work as presented through artifacts. Open a book, say Plato's *Republic*. We presume Plato created it as a text, although he made it look sort of like a very long conversation among a number of people long ago. But looking at it as a text, it is written in words, sentences, and paragraphs—let's call those *human dimensions of the text*. We presume they are there because the author, Plato, choose to use them in order to write down what he had to say. In our edition of Plato, however, the words are also printed on the pages in lines of a certain length, so many lines to a page, each page numbered, white-space bounding the text away from the edge of the pages. All those features and lots of other conventions, are artifactual dimensions of the text as we read it now, deriving not from Plato but from decisions made editors, designers, and compositors in producing our physical artifact, an attractive, readable book.

V 23 — Okay.... I'm understanding the distinction. And to play it out here you want to build a *digital* pedagogy in two steps. First you want to identify the human dimensions in our acquisition of culture—what the persons creating and studying a work were trying to do independent of the media of communication with which they did it, and then second you want to figure out how they can best facilitate those efforts by using new media, dispensing with the limitations of print-based communications and taking full advantage of encoding cultural resources in states of energy.

R 24 — In a nutshell, that's it. Distinguishing between the human dimension of cultural resources and the artifactual aspects presents challenges as does figuring out how to take advantage of encoding them electronically. Judging by how long it took to adapt educational practices to printing and other

mechanical technologies, the two-step process will entail a long evolutionary emergence. But we can try some possibilities through *A Place to Study* rather quickly.

**V 25 — Can you quickly sketch the key aspects of those possibilities. I'm a bit late meeting up with some friends so I should go quickly.**

**R 26 — Sure. Here are the two main ways we are proceeding.**

*First*, material coding of cultural resources has historically made them as artifacts very expensive to produce and use. These artifactual characteristics of them — high cost, scarcity, and difficulty of use — have narrowed the full employment of them to privileged elites and specialists. For most people, *working with* an expansive collection of the existing cultural resources actually comes very late, if at all, in the processes of personal development. By and large, high material overhead instead restricted education primarily to *learning about* those resources secondhand from others. Electronic media radically cut costs and enhance the flexibility of use making it possible for all persons to work with the primary resources of the culture when, where, and with whom they like for purposes that they choose. We want to make a full, well-organized, easily used collection of existing cultural resources freely available to anyone anywhere through *A Place to Study* opening up opportunities for self-formation and liberal learning by *working with* those resources, not merely *learning about* them.

*Second*, historically, when most people had opportunities only to *learn about* powerful cultural resources, the basic formative standpoint consisted in a third-person he or she *learning about* herself or himself and the world he or she inhabited. This is the standpoint assumed in most implementations of digital technologies in contemporary education. In the process of study, the formative standpoint consists of *working with*, a natural first-person forming a sense of self and the world through direct experience with cultural resources. Throughout *A Place to Study*, we structure opportunities and resources for study enabling visitors and residents to engage them from a first-person, I/we basis.

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1. Wilhelm Dilthey, (1879), *Pädagogik: Geschichte und Brundlinien des Systems*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IX. Band. p. 8 (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1961).

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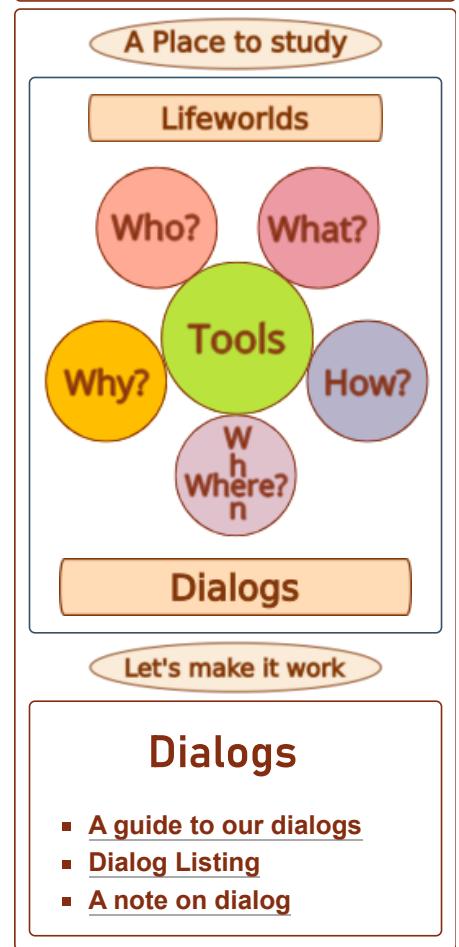
# Aspiration

An aspiration signifies a personal quest to become someone who rises up to meet a challenge she perceives as difficult, uncharted.

As with my concerns, my aspiration is a reflexive desire, a wish to become the person who rises up to meet some important challenge. As with a predicament, an aspiration is sustained, complex, many-sided, and although powerful, often somewhat vague, hard to discern or express clearly. We often experience our aspirations as inward intimations of latent possibilities, which ordinary circumstances do not easily permit us to robustly manifest.

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# Control

Here we understand *control* as a reflexive verb, indicating what I do to control myself or an extension of myself, as in driving I control my car. Control involves the effort by a living person to use positive and negative feedback to modulate reciprocal interactions of significance for her self-maintenance. The possibility of control arises as one postulates a telos, relative to which one judges negative and positive feedback, continually adjusting what is taking place. Control takes place, we exercise it as it happens, adjusting, responding, too little there, too much here, nothing fixed or unchanging until the action has taken place, slipping beyond control into the fixity of the past. An agent naturally seeks to exercise control, for that effort differentiates agency from mere drift or passive response. Its success or failure is contingent on the capacities of the agent and the particulars of the circumstances impinging on the effort. Whatever the pace, attentive study informs and limits its possibility.

V 1 — You know, R, I've been eyeing *control* up there in the heading for a long time, feeling wary every time I see it, and it's hard not to see it! So what's it doing there?

R 2 — I've been wondering when worries like your's would come up. People habitually use the passive voice, especially in thinking about themselves, They become the object on which the verb acts, pawns controlled by all the unseen hands of politics, commerce, and social pressure. Look how that miserable virus snuck out and suddenly forced everyone round the world to stop their lives and attend to its dictates.

V 3 — Well, doesn't that show inescapably how much we are in the control of untoward circumstance? Whenever what's expected of us is clear, good or bad, we seem to have to go along to get along.

R 4 — Certainly you can look at it that way. All kinds of forces are out of our control. Powerful interests mobilize techniques of social control to induce us to behave the way they want—to do as they please, to buy this, and to think that. It takes a good deal of self-control to minimize the power of those techniques in shaping our lives. Too much worry about the power of Big Brother weakens our attention to our own agency, our powers of control. Even with a pandemic, our wisdom and efficacy turns on our ability to distinguish rightly what falls within our control and what falls outside of it.

V 5 — I sense that you have something pretty fundamental in mind with the phenomenon of control, but you need to explain it and I will try to follow your thought. Template:Close

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



### Dialogs

#### Let's make it work

## Dialogs

- [A guide to our dialogs](#)
- [Dialog Listing](#)
- [A note on dialog](#)

# Expressing meaning

V 1 — I need to hear more before I can ask useful questions. Tell me about what goes on with *Verbs* in your pedagogy.

R 2 — Sure, the term centers on verbs in the strict sense, but draws much more in as a kind of shorthand for what we take to be the generative source of meaningful language. How does linguistic expression become meaningful in our lives? It generates meaning as we link it to our direct, immediate intuition of our agency exercised in perceiving, acting, and reflecting.

V 3 — I guess that is fairly obvious, at least with many verbs, but what happens with the more general shorthand?

R 4 — Clearly we use language to describe matters quite separate from our subjective agency, but we may achieve that through a manner of speaking. In a fairly naïve sense, say for a child learning to speak, does a noun denote a thing, or a certain mode of interacting with the world? To be a bit more specific, does *chair* become a meaningful noun because it indicates some instance or type of object called "chair," or does it become meaningful because it indicates a mode of sitting that we do and then associate it with specific somethings that we perceive as suitable for sitting that way?

V 5 — So you are saying that language is meaningful to us because it traces back to our lived sense of agency. Are you also saying that language potentially becomes generative of agency if we use it to strengthen, expand, or direct our agency?

R 6 — Yes, in a peculiar manner. Like all forms of thinking and acting, speaking takes place prior to our aware control of our speaking — we originate substantive speech pre-verbally and we hear it, both as listener and also as speaker, after the fact.

V 7 — Unh . . . I guess that's right. Once in a while I've had the experience of starting to speak hesitantly and then the words start to flow and I'm no longer really aware of what I'm saying, but afterwards someone tells me how meaningful they thought what I said was. And I feel kind of stupid because I'm not at all sure what I said. I spoke what I thought but didn't hear it myself.

R 8 — And conversely, what we hear and sometimes say can simply be words, grammatically sensible, but without meaning, sometimes because we haven't heard the sounds clearly, but more significantly because we recognize the words but haven't yet attached them to a meaningful conceptualization of action in our understanding. We know the word but have insufficient or confused ideas about the activities that give it meaning. If we recognize that we don't understand what is audibly being said, language can become generative of agency, not by imparting the agency to us, but by triggering awareness in us that we are ignorant of a kind of agency of enough importance in our world for it to be spoken of. That can set our search of an understanding of that form of agency in motion. [Template:Close](#)

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## A Place to study

### Lifeworlds



### Dialogs

### Let's make it work

## Dialogs

- [A guide to our dialogs](#)
- [Dialog Listing](#)
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# So you want to add a page

V 1 — Well, R, I've been reading around on *A Place to Study* long enough. I want to begin adding material. I've got some ideas to share.

R 2 — Sounds good. You know what we say, "To begin, begin."

V 3 — Yeah. I did that, clicking on my name in the upper right corner and then on "Sandbox" on the menu that dropped down. But there were then some confusing things with the box that opens up. It says "Create" and next to it "Create source" with slightly different little crayon icons next to each. Elsewhere I see the same deal with "Edit" and "Edit source."

R 4 — Ha! You begin and Bingo! you hit a speed bump. Good. MediaWiki offers two editors and it pays to understand why.

V 5 — Maybe, but I've begun, and just want to get on with it. Which is best, edit or edit source?

R 6 — Do you think if one were clearly the best, they'd offer two? Either one will do for just getting on with it. These days most people will find using the plain "Edit" option a little more familiar, but they'll also encounter situations where it doesn't work and they'll have to use "Edit source."

V 7 — OK. It's a choice. Once I got a bit familiar with "Edit source," would it much more complicated than using "Edit"?

R 8 — I don't think so, but my experience with text editing goes back almost 50 years. What seems simple to me might appear complicated to you.

V 9 — Well. It's my choice and I'll risk it. I suspect by going with "Edit source, I'll understand my options and how to go about what I might try to express what I think and feel effectively. You'll be willing to coach me some along the way, I trust?"

R 10 — Sure. I like your spirit there — it's your choice and you'll risk it. I think you're making the sound choice here with the proper attitude. By that I mean first your seeking to understand your options, comprehending the scope of your possibilities, and then forming your own internal standards for directing your efforts to actualize how you can and should accomplish them. That way, you make yourself the agent.

All sorts of computer programs, especially text editors, aka word processors, serve two major functions — helping effort to compose what we want to say and to control how it will appear to others. The first function is pretty straightforward, involving keyboarding souped up with souped up with standardized revising operations like cutting and pasting. The second function is a bit more complicated, involving inserting "markup" at appropriate places in the text

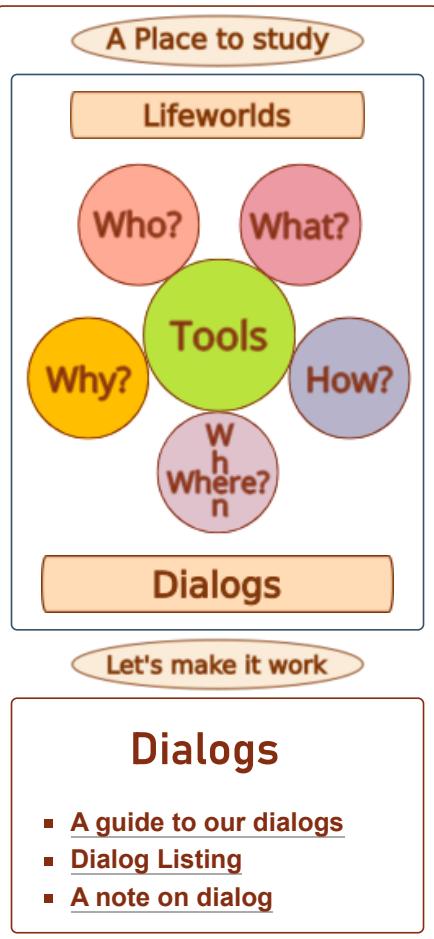
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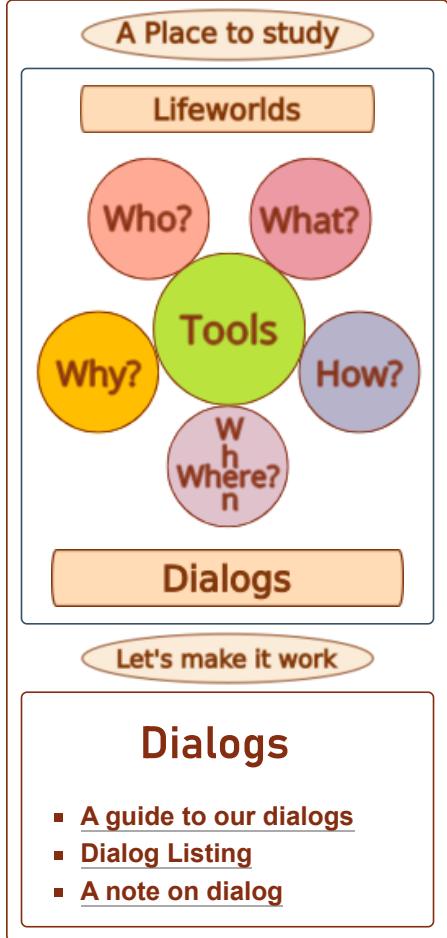
# My project

A person's life project forms, early and silently as one begins to feel concerns, sense predicaments, develop capacities, and pursue aspirations. The project expresses a person's dynamic self. Once started, it then morphs continuously in interaction with one's circumstances, often in minor ways, on occasion in major transformations, yet the form, the project continues.

As part of the morphing, from time to time a person assesses herself by looking back to look ahead to see how prospects might best flow from present actualities. These assessments may be silent, merely a disposition or inclination, or fully explicit, a manifest for self and others. As time goes on, a succession of these self-assessments unfolds and one's life project becomes apparent in the continuity across these, discernible despite differences in the particulars. Thus the morphological continuity of the self emerges through its continuous transformation.

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# Making it work in a digital commons

## To Do List

On *A Place to Study* we aim to enhance our personal agency, forming ourselves and learning liberally in the digital commons. That purpose should inform the way we go about developing the skills and capacities with which we can pursue it. We bootstrap our abilities to work effectively here and throughout our lives. Each of us will want and need skills and capacities far exceeding those we can acquire. Hence we cooperate and support each other while tactfully recognizing the independence of each.

- Know where you are coming from.
- To begin, begin and then advance recursively.
- Recognize fully what needs to be done and then act on what you can do well.
- Whatever the task, use the most powerful tools available to you in order to extend your skills while achieving a purpose.
- Respect the principle of *enough*.
- Clues

***A Place* inspires our aspirational thinking**

***to Study* expands our aspirational**

**capacities**

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# Gearing up

Everyone shapes themselves by gearing up, by selecting and using tools of various sorts to advance their purposes. Humans comprise the tool-making species, not uniquely, but characteristically. What's a rattle to an infant but an instrument with which to make a particular noise — one astonishing, pleasing, puzzling? Each person lives life by gearing up, starting very young, and we keep doing it throughout our lives.

Our choosing gear goes on life long. Each does it in a slowly changing pattern, nurturing interests, disclosing style and taste, advancing purpose. A few accomplish great work with the sparest gear; others parade through life, coiffed and bedecked, office and home filled with the every gizmo, creating mainly pretense. Between those extremes, most of us find gear necessary in forming and actualizing our potentials. A great deal of the endemic historical elitism arose because the available gear was scarce, therefore expensive, and difficult to use. Material conditions limited multitudes in the use of powerful gear for important cultural purposes.

Let us take the year 2000 in an extended sense, starting it 25 years before and ending 25 years after. Those of us living through the year 2000 have experienced, wittingly or not, an amazing transition. *Before*, meaning throughout the lives of all humans, everywhere, back through the mists of bygone time, each person geared up with their major possibilities determined largely by material constraints. *After*, those constraints have simply disappeared. We are gearing up largely as before, not by necessity, but simply because we are ignorant about what else we might do. The transition has not run its course, but before and after are in place with the constraints broken by a cascade of cultural resources that confronts each with too much.

But the formative condition of *Too much* enervates as powerfully as that of *Too little*. We can and should aspire to choose wisely in gearing up. In some ways the problem of choosing well becomes all the more difficult — not, What can I use? but, Which should I use? And the very calculus of choosing what to use changes, for its cost, power, and ease of use in a world of print are not at all the same in the digital environment.

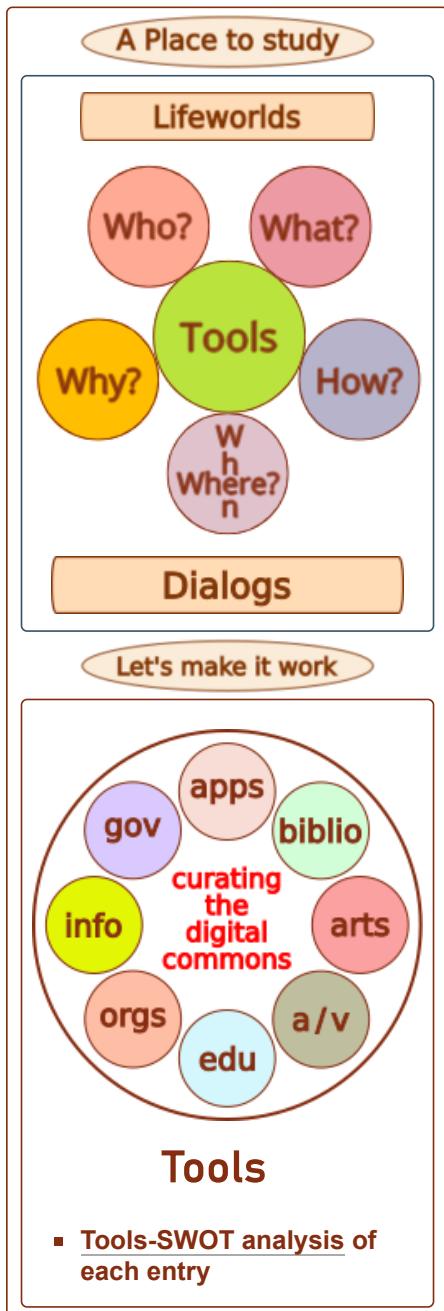
For each of us, the material ethos of our place and time sketches boldly the stages and features of our gearing up. But for each of us, a succession of accidents and choices, large and small, make the way that each gears up key to the way we stamp our path through life with unique particularity. The given stages and features greatly exceed what we can internalize and use. Hence, the particulars through which a person shapes herself give her life form and meaning. We cannot package these or find some essential plan within them, pertinent to all. We can, however, share insights into the processes as each experiences them, accidents, happy and untoward, and efforts, some of which work out and some of which do not. Sharing our particular experience gearing up can inform, perhaps enlighten, enliven, the choices each has yet to make.

Tell us your story.

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# Digital applications

- [GIMP](https://www.gimp.org/) (<https://www.gimp.org/>) :Image editing tool for manipulating color, cropping and resizing, and optimizing file size for the web
- [\[1\]](https://www.gimp.org/inkscape) (<https://www.gimp.org/inkscape>) :Vector graphics editor for creating SVG and PDF files
- [Krita](https://krita.org/) (<https://krita.org/>) :Drawing and painting tool for use with a tablet

Bulma: CSS framework for designing interfaces LazPaint: Lightweight raster and vector graphics editor

Shotcut: Non-linear video editor with support for hundreds of audio and video formats and codecs thanks to FFmpeg, 360° Video Filters, and 4k/ProRes. Olive: Upcoming video editor that features flexible node-based compositing

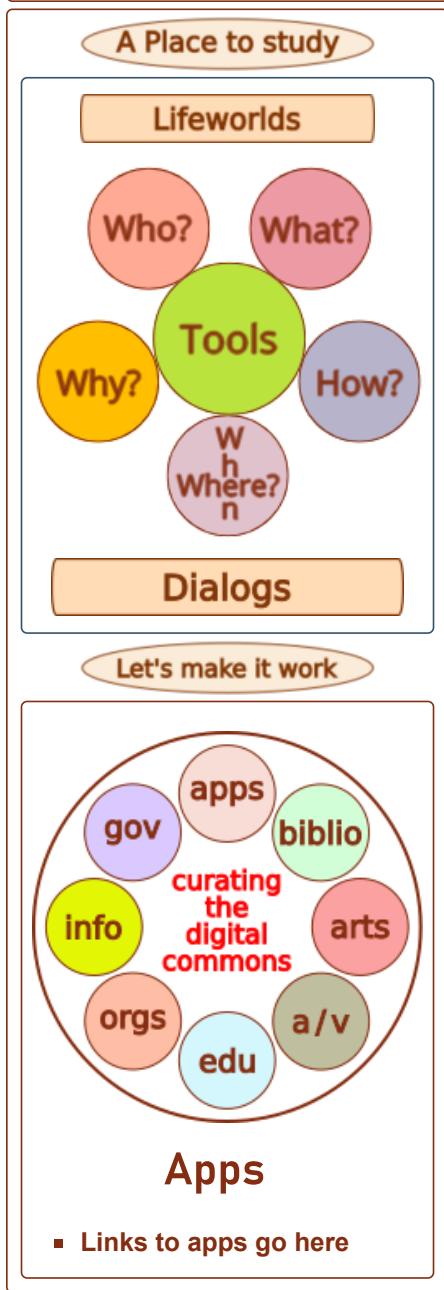
Ardour: Music creation software with support for AudioUnit, LV2, LinuxVST and LADSPA formats Audacity: Audio software for editing, mixing, and recording audio

OpenSCAD: Program for creating solid 3D CAD objects FreeCAD: General-purpose 3D CAD modeling software Slic3r: 3D printing slicing software Repetier-Host: 3D printing host software for managing and controlling 3D printers.

LibreOffice Writer: Word processor with advanced layout and formatting options

Scribus: Desktop publishing software for creating books, brochures, and other printed materials Calibre: E-book management and conversion tool Pressbooks: Web-based platform for creating, publishing, and sharing books.

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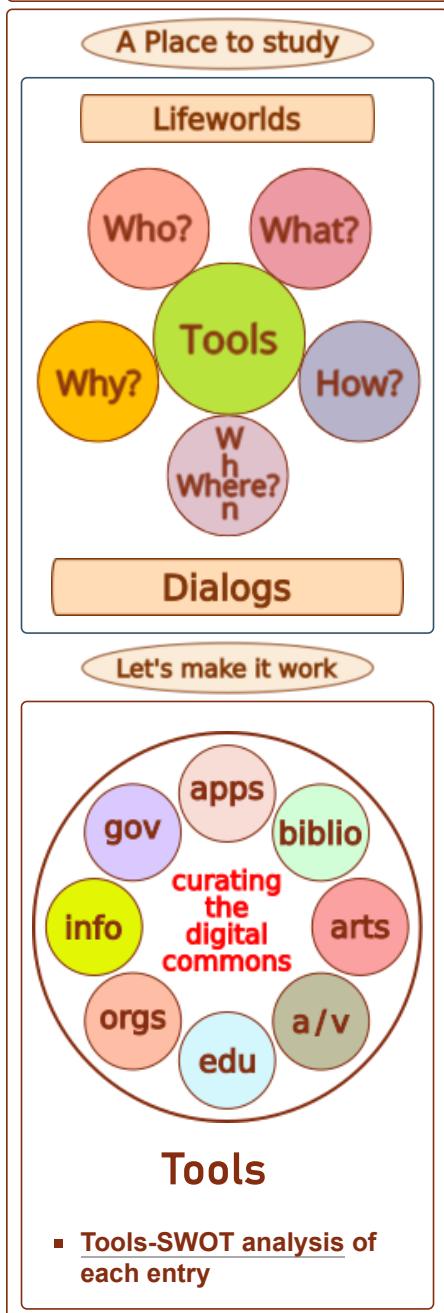
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# Books and Libraries

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- [DART - Europe E-Theses Portal](https://www.dart-europe.org/basic-search.php) (<https://www.dart-europe.org/basic-search.php>)
- [Digital Commons Network](http://network.bepress.com/) (<http://network.bepress.com/>)
- [Directory of Open Access Journals \(DOAJ\)](https://doaj.org/) (<https://doaj.org/>)
- [ERIC: Education Resources Information Center](https://eric.ed.gov/) (<https://eric.ed.gov/>)
- [ETHOS: Electronic Theses Online Service](https://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do) (<https://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do>)
- [Fashion and Race Database](https://fashionandrace.org/) (<https://fashionandrace.org/>)
- [Library of Congress Catalog](https://fashionandrace.org/) (<https://fashionandrace.org/>)
- [LISTA: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts](https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/library-information-science-and-technology-abstracts) (<https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/library-information-science-and-technology-abstracts>)
- [Look and Learn Historical Image Archive \(free images from public collections\)](https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/free-public-domain-images.php) (<https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/free-public-domain-images.php>)
- [National Academies Press \(free e-books available\)](https://nap.nationalacademies.org/) (<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/>)
- [Dissertation Express](https://disexpress.umi.com/search.htmlProQuest) (<https://disexpress.umi.com/search.htmlProQuest>)
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- [Smithsonian Archives](https://siarchives.si.edu/) (<https://siarchives.si.edu/>)
- [Smithsonian Collections Search Center](https://collections.si.edu/search/) (<https://collections.si.edu/search/>)
- [Smithsonian Institution Contributions and Studies Series](https://repository.si.edu/handle/10088/796) (<https://repository.si.edu/handle/10088/796>)
- [Smithsonian Research Online](https://research.si.edu/) (<https://research.si.edu/>)
- [SIRIS: Smithsonian Institution Research Information System](http://www.siris.si.edu/) (<http://www.siris.si.edu/>)
- [WorldCat.org](https://www.worldcat.org/) (<https://www.worldcat.org/>)
- [Literariness.org](https://literariness.org/) (<https://literariness.org/>)
- [AHRnet Biographical Dictionary](https://architecture.arthistoryresearch.net/) (<https://architecture.arthistoryresearch.net/>)
- [Artsy: Art Collecting and Education](https://www.artsy.net/artists) (<https://www.artsy.net/artists>)
- [Bibliography of the History of Art \(BHA\) \(Getty\)](https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/bha/) (<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/bha/>)
- [CAMEO: Conservation & Art Materials Encyclopedia Online](http://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Main_Page) ([http://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Main_Page))

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- [Conservation Information Network \(BCIN\) \(http://www.biographi.ca/en/index.php\)](http://www.biographi.ca/en/index.php)
- [Dictionary of Canadian Biography \(http://www.biographi.ca/en/index.php\)](http://www.biographi.ca/en/index.php)
- [Independent Voices \(alternative presses\) \(https://voices.revealdigital.org/\)](https://voices.revealdigital.org/)
- [IsisCB Explore \(Bibliography of the History of Science\) \(http://data.isiscb.org/\)](http://data.isiscb.org/)
- [Digital Library \(Cornell\) \(https://digital.library.cornell.edu/collections?q=&search\\_field=all\\_fields&utf8=%E2%9C%93\)](https://digital.library.cornell.edu/collections?q=&search_field=all_fields&utf8=%E2%9C%93)

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