



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

CREATING EFFECTIVE STUDY GROUPS

A study group is a group of students taking the same course, often the same section of a course, who work together to increase their learning in the course. Such groups can make a significant difference to student success. This handout suggests strategies for organizing and conducting study groups in ways that will maximize their usefulness to students.

Benefits of Study Groups

Students have reported a wide range of benefits from participating in study groups. Study groups can create:

- A cooperative, rather than competitive, learning opportunity
- A chance to make friends and have fun
- An opportunity to increase your learning and do better in your courses
- An opportunity to develop your study strategies.
- Increased motivation - participants have a sense of commitment and accountability
- Teamwork skill development (Include your participation in the study group on your resume so that employers know you have teamwork experience)

How to Form a Study Group

Some instructors require you to participate in study groups; in such cases, your group is often assigned. However, in most cases, study groups are established by students who feel a study group would help them learn more and get more connected with other students. If you want to form your own study group, you should look for 2 to 5 other people who are dedicated, easy to work with, and offer a range of perspectives. You can recruit members by:

- word of mouth
- advertising (posters on bulletin boards, announcement in class)
- asking your instructor for assistance
- asking the Learning Centre for assistance

Getting Started

Getting off to a good start is crucial to the development of an effective study group. Start with an informal meeting of interested people. In that meeting you may want to consider:

1. **People's goals:** Why do people want to participate in the group? Talking about goals explicitly can help the group to develop a shared mission.
2. **Schedules:** Establish a time for regular group meetings. Without a regular, established time, groups typically don't last very long.
3. **Location:** Go for a comfortable place you can count on being available. The library has some small rooms that you can book for study groups. For safety reasons, avoid meeting in private homes unless you know other group members well.
4. **A communication strategy:** How will members contact one another? Exchange introductions and phone numbers, if this seems appropriate.
5. **Learning Needs:** What, specifically, do members want to get out of the group? Do they want to clarify understanding, share ideas, prepare for exams, and/or ...?
6. **Learning Strategies:** Discuss what learning strategies seem most appropriate to the group's needs (see list below). Re-examine these regularly to make sure what you are doing is working for everyone.
7. **How the group will operate:** This includes the following:
 - Discuss whether having someone lead the sessions would be beneficial. If so, consider rotating this role or having someone external to the group (e.g. a peer tutor from the Learning Centre) perform this function. Decide what kind of role such a leader should have.
 - Establish guidelines for participation. It's a good idea to write these guidelines down so that people can refer back to them as needed. Below are some examples of such guidelines that seem to be most useful:
 - Everyone must come prepared for each session – this isn't the place to get caught up on homework people haven't had time to do. Try to read your chapter, review lecture notes and complete assignments before coming to the study group session. Bring specific questions or requests based on the work you have trouble understanding or doing.

- Everyone agrees that the study group will promote a *collaborative* learning environment where everyone will help and encourage others to find answers to the questions and concerns at hand. Everybody should have an opportunity to raise questions and express their concerns.
- Everyone agrees that they will show up on time and will let others know if they can't come.

Clarifying these issues at the outset can give your group its best chance for success.

Structure of a Typical Study Group Session

To make your regular study group sessions most productive, try following this structure:

Beginning the Session

1. Update members on things done in preparation for the session. Remind yourselves of any plans made last session for today's session. Write these down somewhere where everyone can see them.
2. Create an agenda. To do this:
 - Group members tell about their current needs. Needs might include: *I had trouble understanding Concept X; I'm not sure if I'm on the right track with my assignment; I'm really interested in issue X; I can't figure out how to do X.* Make sure every member has a chance to contribute at this stage. Add the issues raised to the written list you started in #1.
 - Prioritize the issues raised. What are the most important ones to get to today? Which ones should be put off to another day?
 - Decide on an activity for working on each priority issue. (See the Possible Study Group Learning Activities section of this handout for ideas on activities you might choose.) Assign a time limit to each activity. Assign one member to be the time keeper for the session.

The Middle of the Session

Work on the activities you identified on your agenda. If you run out of time, briefly discuss whether to extend the time or move on to other issues.

Ending the Session

End your activities about 10 minutes prior to your time being up. In those 10 minutes, consider the following:

- What the group accomplished today.

- What the group wants to work on next time.
- What group members should do to prepare for the next study group session.

Possible Study Group Learning Activities

Study groups can usefully undertake a wide variety of learning activities. Activities can focus on course content, test preparation, assignments, interesting issues, study strategies and group dynamics. Activities can be done by the whole group, or smaller groups of students can work together and report back to the whole group. Be creative and develop strategies that work for your group. This section includes some activities that students have found to be successful. Try these out, modify them and develop your own.

- Take turns explaining material to the group (teaching is a great way of learning). Take an inventory of the key topics in the material, and then divide up the topics according to the number of members in the group. Take turns giving a mini-lesson.
- Compare notes. Make sure your notes match and check out any areas that you had trouble understanding a lecture. (When you take lecture notes in class, put a question mark in the margin whenever you don't understand something).
- Generate a list of possible test questions. Discuss how feasible it is that each of the questions will actually be on the test. Make a test that people can do in the session or at home. Discuss your answers at the next session. Talking about things will help you remember better than just reading over each others' answers.
- Discuss assignments instructions. What are you supposed to do? What resources should you use? What small steps could you take that would lead to the completion of a larger assignment? What criteria is the instructor going to use to evaluate the assignment?
- Peer-edit each other's written assignments. Don't tell others what to write, just give them feedback on what they wrote. How does the work measure up to the evaluation criteria for the assignment?
- Practice oral presentations in front of the group and give each other constructive feedback.

- Work in small groups creating summaries of lectures and chapters. One person writes, another dictates the summaries, others cross-reference lecture notes with textbooks and other materials.
- Create large mind maps, tables, or flow charts to illustrate the relationship between concepts in several different chapters or lectures. Break the group up into pairs and assign one branch of the map or section of the table or chart to each pair. The Learning Centre has handouts on how to create these graphic organizers.
- Have discussions about important issues or concepts, e.g. compare and contrast two theories or processes; examine the real-life application of a theory; work through problems out loud.
- Work through the study guide together.
- To learn terminology or vocabulary, create flashcards and use them to drill each other. Be sure to alternate between showing the side with the word and the side with the definition so that you learn the material both ways.
- Have a regular study group check-up time when people can talk about what activities they are finding most useful, what activities they don't find useful and issues of group dynamics.

Overcoming Potential Obstacles

Study groups can experience difficulties. It is important when difficulties arise to talk about them with the group. Discussing problems gives group members a chance to work through difficulties and create a better group. Below are some suggestions of strategies for dealing with some of the more common problems study groups run into. Generally problems result from difficulties in group dynamics.

- Does your group have people who participate too much or people who don't participate enough? Here are some things you can try:
 - Talk about the importance of everyone participating and have the group develop strategies to make that happen.
 - Do some learning tasks in pairs, matching quiet people with other quiet ones and talkative with talkative. Later, have each pair report back to the larger groups.

- Break up tasks so that everyone has a part (e.g. everyone explains one concept or reviews one section) and go around the table giving each person a turn.
 - Whenever input on important issues is needed, go around the table giving each person a chance to contribute.
 - Assign each person a task for upcoming sessions. This way quieter members aren't put on the spot.
 - Occasionally give quieter members quieter tasks such as taking notes and reporting back, or timekeeping. Give more talkative members chairperson duties; making it clear that part of their role is to make sure everyone gets a turn to participate.
- Does your group get sidetracked, e.g. the session turns into a gripe-fest or becomes too much of a social event?
 - Build in break time and agree that this is when people can "vent" or tell everyone what they did on the weekend
 - Do people in the group prefer learning in different ways?
 - Include a variety of study activities in your sessions so that different learning preferences are accommodated. A side benefit is that students become familiar with a broader range of learning strategies.
 - Do people in the group want to focus on different things?
 - Share the time so that all members' priorities get some attention. In larger groups, you can divide people up into smaller groups for parts of sessions in order to focus more specifically on individual interests.

Conclusion

Study groups can be a really useful addition to your individual study strategies. Successful study groups usually establish clear guidelines for how they will operate and make group dynamics and study strategies as well as content knowledge issues for discussion.

The Learning Centre has developed this handout to help students work effectively in study groups. If you have feedback on the handout, the Learning Centre would appreciate hearing from you.