Study Group Handbook

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Group study is a topic that elicits strong feelings from students and professors alike. Some people love study groups and will seek them out whenever possible. Still others prefer to study alone and avoid group study at all costs. The truth is that there are good study groups and there are bad study groups. Although it is true that learning preferences affect the way a student chooses to study, the research indicates that students who participate in organized study groups for certain classes generally do better than those who do not. The key to success is formulating a well-run, productive group.

Starting out

In *A Training Guide for College Tutors and Peer Educators* (2011), Sally A. Lipsky sets forth guidelines for successful study groups. She asserts that in order to gain the most from collaborative learning sessions, the groups must be fair, structured, comfortable, and active. Using Lipsky’s basic tenants for collaborative learning, the following guidelines are for creating an optimal study group.

**Publicizing the benefits of collaborative work.**

*Nobody is as smart as everybody.*

- Kevin Kelly

No matter what kind of study group you want to hold, you will need to devise a way to both advertise for members and communicate with one another.

Advertising: When advertising your study group, you will want to publicize the benefits of collaboration. You may find that many members of the Villanova student body have had negative experiences with group work in the past. This is most likely due to “forced” pairings for class projects for which they had to do more than their share of the work. Keep advertisements positive and emphasize the advantages of group study by listing some of the activities you are planning. Also, be creative about where you advertise. Consider using flyers, the VU newswire, Facebook, Twitter, and professors. In a study published by the Pew Research Center in February 2010, 75% of the Millennials’ (individuals born in the last two decades of the 20th century) questioned have a profile on a social networking site such as Facebook and 83% sleep with their cell phones.
In this age of social networking, it is wise to use methods available to you in order to communicate with your study group. By having a set time, place, and mode of communication, your group will be able to properly prepare for an effective session. Here are some ideas for fostering efficient communication:

- **Use social networking sites such as facebook to create a group page.** Choose one or two administrators to monitor the page and use it as a hub for any changes in location or topic.

- **During the first session, be sure to get everyone’s cell phone numbers.** Distribute the information and ask everyone to create a "group" in their address book. Should anyone have a question, it can then easily go out to all group members. If your group is large, consider enacting a phone tree.

- **In addition to obtaining and distributing email addresses,** you may also want to create a wiki for your study group. By doing this, you will create a virtual "meeting place" for your group.
Planning ahead

Ideally, study groups should be as consistent and organized as possible. College life can be unpredictable, and therefore flexibility is a good thing, but when it comes to study groups reliability and regularity are key.

When planning for your study session, remember to make it L.A.S.T.

Location
- Securing the same spot each week will eliminate any confusion.

Agenda
- Have an idea of what material you want to cover, how the session will run, and who will fulfill certain roles within the group. Talk about what you accomplished and set some goals before you finish the session.

Schedule
- Make your study group like a fake class, i.e. plan to meet the same time each week. Build it into your planner as you would any other reoccurring appointment.

Timeframe
- Agree on how long you want each session to last. Adhering to this timeframe will help the group increase productivity.

Creating a comfortable, cohesive, and trusting environment.

[W]hen the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions.

-C.S. Lewis

Good group dynamics are essential for successful group study. In order to get the best out of everyone in the group, it helps to get to know one another. Select a comfortable place to work that suits the needs of everyone in the group. Consider setting up a rotating schedule for things like note cards, books, and snacks. In the beginning, have a frank conversation about how do you want to assign roles, give and receive feedback, and decide on what material to cover. These are tricky questions that initially need to be posed by the person or persons starting the group. A good place to start is with Longman and Atkinson’s Bill of Rights for Study Groups (see tools section).

Peer to peer interaction creates a much different dynamic than what you might find in the classroom. Unlike the relationship between professors and students, the ideal study group is nonhierarchical. Think about the group you would like to have. What are some examples that would exemplify the collaborative format in the group?
Setting ground rules and assigning individual roles and responsibilities within groups.

*The well-run group is not a battlefield of egos.*
-Lao Tzu

Although most study groups have a founder or leader that will initially take over the set up of a group, it is helpful to think about how others fit into the team. Talk amongst yourselves to figure out who should assume what roles. As the group gets to know one another’s strengths and weaknesses, adjust the roles accordingly. Always keep fairness in mind. No one wants to feel like they are doing an unfair share of the workload.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal-Setter</td>
<td>Establishes purposes; poses questions.</td>
<td>“What is the best way to approach this?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“What information do we have?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“What’s the best way to explain…?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“How did you know that?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informant</td>
<td>Provides information; suggests new ideas, perspectives, or opinions; translates information.</td>
<td>“According to page 112, the three causes are…?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“This problem is like…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“What that means is…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processor</td>
<td>Probes for meanings; clarifies information; elaborates, interprets, or applies information.</td>
<td>“How does the text support our notes?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“How could we use that principle in this problem?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“How does this idea compare with that one?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluator</td>
<td>Defines and monitors progress; check to see if group is ready to decide or come to a conclusion; summarizes and synthesizes results; resolves conflicts; judges results and outcomes.</td>
<td>“So the best response is to…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“That is our answer?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“To summarize the process, we…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“This solution is better because…?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Motivates group members; provides support and encouragement.</td>
<td>“Let’s look at the facts again.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“How else might we solve this problem?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“What do you think about…?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Engaging in activities that are meaningful and challenging.

There are basically two types of people. People who accomplish things, and people who claim to have accomplished things. The first group is less crowded.
-Mark Twain

Study groups can be fun, but they primarily exist to help a group of likeminded students better understand class material. Too much socializing, a lack of focus or dedication, or an unwillingness to work will undoubtedly shorten the lifespan of any study group. Here is Lipsky’s list of recommended appropriate collaborative activities:

Do’s…

- Creating an outline or chart that summarizes class notes or readings.
- Tackling practice questions.
- Solving a set of problems.
- Developing examples.
- Creating models.
- Simulating case studies.
- Teaching the material to one another.
- Evaluating each other’s essays.
- Predicting exam questions.
- Rehearsing a presentation.
- Playing games, which are particularly appropriate and popular for review before tests.

Don’ts…

- Slow down for students who are not prepared or are not keeping up with their work and lagging behind.
- Let dominating students take over sessions.
- Let criticism and negativity permeate sessions.
- Be rigid with plans.
- Remain satisfied with the status quo.
Tools

How do you know if study groups are right for you?

Studying with classmates is an excellent option for many students, but it is not for everybody or every class. Ask yourself the following questions to determine whether it may be beneficial to start or join a study group.

- Will group study force me to become more actively involved with the course content?
- Will talking about, reacting to, and discussing the material help me learn?
- Can I learn by explaining ideas to someone else?
- Does explaining an idea force me to think and test my own understanding?
- Have study groups worked for me in the past?
- Can I prevent group study sessions from turning into social events where very little study occurs?
- Can I avoid studying with the wrong people—those who spread negative attitudes, are poorly prepared, or are not invested in the class?

Examining Returned Exams

Although it may be the last thing you want to do after getting a test back, the benefits of reviewing returned exams are numerous. Look at the questions you missed and use this chart to analyze why you got them wrong. Apply what you learned to your next exam.

| Test items missed | I did not read the text thoroughly. | The information was not in my notes. | I studied the information but could not recall it. | I knew the information but could not apply it. | I studied wrong information. | I experienced mental block. | I spent too much time daydreaming. | I was so tired I could not concentrate. | I carelessly marked the wrong choice. | I did not choose the best answer. | I second guessed my answer. | I did not use context clues. | I misread the directions. | I misread the question. | I made poor use of the time provided. | I wrote poorly organized/incomplete answers. |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|

A SWOT analysis is a tool generally used by the business world to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats regarding a particular company or initiative.

This type of analysis can be immensely effective when reflecting upon a group project. By applying the SWOT analysis criteria, a group can systematically discuss the quality of a group initiative.

**Strengths:** What are the strongest aspects of the project? What did we do well? How do we know these aspects are compelling?

**Weaknesses:** What are the weakest aspects of the project? How do we know these aspects are ineffective?

**Opportunities:** In what ways can we improve upon our weaknesses? Are there any ways we can use our strengths to our advantage? Are there any less obvious ways to improve upon the project?

**Threats:** How will others (your professors, peers, etc.) evaluate your work? With the project as it stands, what might the grade be? Should these considerations guide you in prioritizing the next steps you take as a group?
KWL Chart

A KWL chart is a simple tool that can help organize what a group of students knows, what they want to know and what they have learned as a result of the study session.

If your study group is struggling to find a place to begin on a particular topic, try filling out the first two columns of this chart as a group and then use it to set an agenda. At the end of the session, chapter, or topic, take a few minutes to assess your progress using the third “What We Learned” column.

If one member's goals appear to differ greatly from the answers of other members, he may want to seek out supplemental tutoring in order to keep pace with the group as a whole. If the gap in knowledge is too great, the particular member may want to seek out a more appropriate study group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Know</th>
<th>What We Want to Know</th>
<th>What We Learned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• All of the terminology from chapter 8 is fair game for Wednesday’s quiz.</td>
<td>• The definitions of the terms not covered in class.</td>
<td>• There were not too many unfamiliar terms in the chapter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There are terms in the chapter that the professor did not go over in class. We are not comfortable with those terms.</td>
<td>• How those terms fit into what we have been studying.</td>
<td>• The definitions of the unfamiliar terms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Blank KWL Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Know</th>
<th>What We Want to Know</th>
<th>What We Learned</th>
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Covey’s Matrix

Covey’s Matrix is designed to help prioritize tasks. Our impulses often tell us to focus only on what is urgent, but that can get us in trouble with long term projects and planning. Your first priorities should be tasks that are both urgent and important. Then, you can move on to tasks that are important, but perhaps not urgent. Unimportant and urgent tasks come next, followed by tasks that are neither important nor urgent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urgent</th>
<th>Not Urgent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting S.M.A.R.T. Goals

When it comes to setting goals, the SMARTER the better. A S.M.A.R.T. goal is a goal that is:

- **S**pecific
  Be as specific as possible. Which chapters do you plan to read? How many pages do you plan to write?

- **M**easurable
  How will you know you have completed your goal?

- **A**ction-oriented
  How will you study? Use active verbs (read, write, etc.) when planning this goal.

- **R**ealistic
  Be honest with yourself. Rather than setting unattainable, broad goals, stick with short-term, manageable goals.

- **T**ime-bound
  What time and for how long will you study?

Sample SMART goal:

I plan to read chapter 6 in my chemistry textbook and answer all of the review questions at the end. I am going to do this task on Tuesday evening; I have allotted 1 hour (7:30-8:30) to finish. Keep SMART goal elements in mind as you develop your study plan.
Bill of Rights for Study Groups

Time-management strategies make or break study groups. Indefinite goals contribute to group, as well as to individual, procrastination. Although the group should have a long-range purpose, it should also have effective short-term objectives that result in accomplishment and closure. The following bill of rights for group members requires commitment of both time and effort by each person.

1. You have the right to limit group membership to no more than five and to dismiss members who consistently fail to meet their commitments as group members.

2. You have the right and responsibility to select a study site and time that are mutually beneficial to all members.

3. You have a right to contribute to the formation of group goals that have measurable outcomes and deadlines.

4. You have the responsibility to be an active participant, not a passive receiver, in the group process, and you have a right to expect active participation from other group members.

5. You have the right to have meetings begin and end promptly and to have study sessions without needless interruptions.

6. You have the right to participate in a group that is free from arguing and competition.

7. You have the right to expect that the group will stay on the task it sets for itself and the responsibility for helping the group do so.

8. You have the right to take a break during an extended study session as long as the group resumes its study after the break.

9. You have the right to ask group members to limit socialization or discussion of off-the-subject topics to before and after study sessions.

10. You have the right to a feeling of accomplishment at (1) the end of each study session and (2) the end of the group’s life span.