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Creating Study Groups in University Classes

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For many first-year students, large classes, adjustment to various teaching styles, impersonal objective evaluation methods, and extensive survey courses contribute to what, some would argue, is the most challenging year of the undergraduate program. Based on research findings, Dr. Willment offers faculty members a successful "blueprint" for designing a Study Group Program for first-year learners in an academic course.

Characteristics of Study Groups

First-year students face new social, academic, and personal challenges when adjusting to university. Study Groups enable learners to effectively adapt by establishing a support mechanism that can help learners to cope with the transition to these demands. With the implementation of study groups in a course, learners have the opportunity to regularly meet with 3-5 colleagues outside of class time, to work together on a course, to discuss course content, and to study for exams in a course.

Establishing a Study Group Program

Many students arriving at university fail to meet academic colleagues in large introductory courses. Moreover, they look to the professor for course guidance. If learners hear that study groups are supported and encouraged by the instructor, it can contribute greatly to study group success.

The research on study groups indicates several benefits from the program. Social benefits include the following:

- developing friendships with colleagues;
- the ability to ask questions of the group;
- listening to other students' viewpoints;
- active discussion about the course.

Academic benefits include the following:

- clarification of course content;
- familiarization with vocabulary of the discipline;
- preparation for assignments and exams;
- discussion which helps in understanding;
- demonstration of ways to grasp content;
- short- and long-term planning;
- opportunities to learn to work together.

Personal benefits include the following:

- problems solved before quizzes;
- the reward of working with others;

- attention to time management issues;
- retains constant learning focus.

A Study Group Orientation enables interested students to join a study group based on a meeting time agreeable to the group. It is also important to hold meetings within the first two weeks for term courses, and within the first month for a full-year course. The concern is that too much content arises if the Orientation is held later in the term. Study groups are encouraged to record on their calendars the date, place, and time of the first meeting. A list of ideas outlining tasks to complete in the initial meeting is helpful.

First Study Group Meetings

Socially, students enjoy the chance to get to know one another. Hometowns, hobbies and sports, reasons for enrolling in the course, their understanding of the course at the present time, and, perhaps, future career plans are all good ice-breaking topics for opening discussion. As the term progresses, it is common for friendships to develop between group members.

Personally, members within a study group bring their own studying styles to the group. Being in a study group will not replace a study strategy that has worked in the past, but will introduce active, group, and enhanced learning.

Academically, it is helpful to plot out an active study strategy the group can follow over the term. A term calendar and course outline are essential for this. Study groups need to see calendar dates outlining topics, chapter readings, assignments, and types and dates of tests and final exams. The study group members need to decide what goals they would like to establish, what kinds of activities they would find helpful, a schedule for these activities, and how they might complete it as a study group. These are only suggestions, and study groups are

free to revisit these goals to make changes as they become familiar working as a group.

Analysis of the Research

In 1995, a pilot project was designed for a first-year Economics course. 350 first- and upper-year students were in the class. Of 180 first-year students, 75 agreed to participate in a Study Group project. A total of 23 study groups were formed, of which 18 met during the term, while 5 did not meet.

Of these 18 groups, 13 met regularly over the term, 4 met three times preceding exams, and 1 met twice during the term. In all cases, students felt the experience was productive.

The study groups that did not meet cited reasons such as difficulty in finding a common meeting time, non-interest, dropping the course, and not keeping a record of who, where, when, or how often they would meet.

Mean grades on three exams were compared between study groups members and non-study group members across all first-year students in the course. While the differences were not statistically significant, mean grades of the study group members were consistently higher than for non-study group participants. Further research is needed to explore these findings in greater detail.

A Case Study

While the research revealed a cross-section of approaches used in study group meetings in a large class, tape recordings of one study group over the term provided insight into the way in which that study group approached its work. The results are briefly summarized below.

First, the study group activities changed over the term as members discovered what worked well for the group in the course. At the outset of the term, they used primarily a passive set of studying strategies. These included the following:

- reviewing and correcting class notes for errors and omissions;
- discussing concepts to ensure understanding by all members;
- preparing for the midterm;
- 'guesstimating' the number, type, and difficulty of questions on the midterm.

At the end of the term, this study group had developed an active style of working together which proved an effective study strategy. This included the ability to:

- challenge members to explain a concept to one another;
- apply examples to concepts;
- use logic to deduce answers from test questions;
- develop test-taking strategies;
- create questions for the group.

Second, indications of consensus-building, sharing with others, encouraging others, and co-operating with others within the group were illustrated at the end of the term:

"I figured we'd go through it, compare answers, and try to analyse each question. What do you think?"

"I don't understand why this is the case – can somebody explain this to me?"

"I don't know if you guys think it's important – what would you like to do?"

Third, indicators of cohesiveness were also found. Appreciation for the group, understanding of others' needs, and the strengthening of the group were illustrated through the following quotations:

"I wish I had something like this group in my other courses."

"When I came to university I needed something to get me going and you have helped me get through the midterm."

"I know what you mean, I'm exhausted too – but we are getting there."

Fourth, signs of risk-taking were noted in the remarks made by individual members and by the group as a whole, as the following illustrates.

"Maybe we are so scared we have decided to group together!"

"I'm beginning to think it isn't that tough as long as you think about it."

"I hope we have covered enough for the exam – I guess our marks will tell the tale."

Study Groups for Distance Education

At Athabasca University, Athabasca, Canada, last Fall preliminary indications were that on-line study groups are also a very useful strategy and enhancement to distance education students. On-line learners were in a transition period as they adjusted to returning to university and dealt with challenges in a first-year, on-line graduate program.

Study groups were used by learners to express insights that were semi-private, were not judged to be for the larger on-line class, and often expressed personal feelings between select groups of students. They also used study groups to share, plan, question, and co-ordinate activities in the course. This was often crucial, as most of these adult learners had the additional dual demands of work and family. Future research needs to be done on on-line study groups.

Summary

For faculty members interested in exploring ways to support and guide students in their first-year in university, either on-campus or on-line study groups can provide a useful resource for learners.



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