

Effective peer support: online study groups

With many students now undertaking much, or all, of their studies online, you may find it helpful to get together online or in person with other students to support each other in your studies. By working together as a group, you can develop study skills and work through problems more effectively. The group benefits from the insights and understanding of the entire group so that you progress faster as students.

Other benefits of peer study groups are:

- They empower students to solve their own problems.
- They facilitate a sharing of knowledge and understanding within the group.
- They allow students to work together on problems and issues that arise in their studies.

Students act as role models and motivators for each other. Often study at university requires a great deal of self-motivation, especially when you are studying from home. Being part of a group can help overcome times when motivation may be lacking.

Working as a group can often help reduce study-related anxiety, while improving your self-esteem.

As a student, you are ideally placed to organise a study group. You are not aiming to teach the group but rather this is a self-help group, where students will study together and help each other. Your role is simply to facilitate the group. This section will review how to go about the process of setting up and running a study group.

Encouraging other students to take part in your study group

Before you start asking people to join, decide how large you want your group to be. If you want a small group with a few friends, simply arrange it with your friends. Don't invite your whole class if you don't plan on having a large group. If you would like to set up a study group for your class, a recommended size for your group would be between 5 and 15 people, more than this and it can become unmanageable.

There are many ways to promote your group, and most will use a combination of these.

- Small informal groups – just contact your friends and see who wants to be part of the group. If you find that there are too many (over 4) for a small group, you can either set up multiple groups or facilitate a more formal group. Contact the mentor co-ordinator at the address below for training and support if you wish to do this.
- Email your class.
- Brightspace discussion groups are another useful method.
- Use social media.

Setting up a study group

We advise students to take some time to set up the study group, and to think about and arrange the following:

- Decide on an online format to meet – perhaps using an online forum in Brightspace or Facebook, or another online chat function such as Skype or Facetime.
- Decide on a time of the week to meet, and frequency of meetings (for example, Tuesday lunchtimes every second week).
- Think about the length of each meeting – an hour tends to be a good amount of time for the first meeting, but you can extend or shorten that once you find out what your group's needs are.
- Think about how you will introduce yourself to the group.
- Think about how you will introduce the group members to each other, and what you will do to make new members who join in later weeks feel welcome.
- Think about how you can make the early sessions feel relaxed, enjoyable, and friendly.
- Think about how you want the group to contact you, for example if someone is ill and can't make the meeting.

Organising your sessions

It is important to be well prepared in order to ensure the session goes well. We recommend:

- Thinking about whether you work together as a large group, or have time where people work in smaller groups.
- Having study sessions where students work together on that week's course work in small groups.
- Making a list of any questions that come up that the group do not know the answer to. Someone can volunteer to ask their lecturer on behalf of the group.

Remember that the group is learning from each other whilst studying together. Your role is just to facilitate this to happen.

Prepare yourself for the session

Take a few minutes to think about the topic that you have agreed for the session. If it is not your first meeting think about any topics that the group had previously suggested that they would like to discuss at the next meeting. Check your notes to see if there were any questions that the group wanted to work on together when they next met.

Starting the session

As your fellow students begin 'arriving', make sure to welcome everyone. Make sure to start within five minutes of the agreed starting time, as this encourages everyone to be prompt. Simply saying "Let's get started," or "Well, it's five minutes after one o'clock, lets start the meeting," is a good way to start.

At the first meeting of the group it is a good idea to ask everyone to introduce themselves in case any of the students do not know each other. Make sure to explain the purpose of the group, and that everyone knows they are an equal contributor, highlighting that you are merely the facilitator, not the tutor. Remember to repeat the introductions and explanation of the purpose of the group to any new students who come to future meetings.

Starting a discussion

It is a good idea to have a topic for discussion. As the group progresses most members will raise items they want to discuss. This might include forthcoming assignments or exams (check with your course what arrangements are being made), or a topic that came up on your course. It is good to get everyone contributing by starting the topic off with some thoughts and then letting everyone else contribute. A prompt will encourage other group members to join in the discussion.

During the discussion encourage students to listen to each other. This starts with being a good listener and acting as a good example in this regard. To let the group know that you are listening:

- Look into the camera, don't look around the room.
- Make encouraging statements – nodding or acknowledging what the speaker has said verbally.

We should also encourage students to talk about themselves, and their own thoughts. Part of the purpose of a peer study group is to be open and honest about what students are finding easy or difficult. It should be regarded a safe space to support each other. There should be an atmosphere where students feel comfortable talking about and working through any study-related issues that may have arisen. By working through issues together, the group can quickly overcome any obstacles. It is very often the case that what one student has been struggling with, others have also found challenging.

When a student mentions they are struggling with something, it is important for the mentor to make them feel comfortable and reassure them that they are not alone. Encourage others to join the discussion. Asking open-ended questions can help bring others into the discussion.

There may be a number of issues that the group will quickly find they need support to resolve. Make a note of these. A number of strategies may be appropriate:

- Email a librarian to find suitable online resources.
- Searching online library resources.
- Asking your tutor to clarify or go over something as a result of your discussion.
- Seeking non-academic support from a PAT or student support member of staff.
- Using online study skills resources – see <http://induction.uhi.ac.uk>.

Closing the session

Most peer study group sessions last between an hour and two hours. If the discussion naturally goes on longer, try to bring the meeting to a close when you do get to the end of the appointed time. It is better to come back to an issue than have everyone bored or not wishing to return.

Close the session by:

- Summarising what has been covered and any lessons learnt.
- Note down anything that needs to be researched or answered for the next meeting.
- Agree any actions for the group, as a whole or individually.
- Ask if there is anything anyone would like covered at the next meeting.
- Remind everyone of the date and time of the next meeting and thank them for attending.

Redirecting questions

Because you are arranging and facilitating these sessions, there can be a tendency amongst students to think you have the answers, or that you are there to teach. It is important to keep the group focussed on the fact that the group exists for everyone to help each other. Every student will have their own strengths that they can use to support each other. As mentor you can therefore redirect any questions to the group for them to answer.

Some useful phrases for redirecting questions include:

“Can anyone help answer that question?”

“Does anyone know of a good online book or resource for this?”

“What was said in the class about this?”

Dealing with group dynamics

The following are some pointers to support you with group dynamics:

- Ensure you listen to each student.
- Ask for explanations and ask questions to engage discussion.
- Open the conversation to the whole group.
- Try to keep to a structured session plan to avoid conversations straying onto inappropriate subjects.
- Use activities to engage the group.
- Have some activities of topics for discussion in reserve in case you need to steer the conversation in a different direction.

Taking a more informal approach

If you wish to have a very informal group, a study group can just be an opportunity for a small group of students to study together. By meeting online together, you can ask questions of others, share ideas, and benefit from other students being around to encourage you. Often a small group of two or three people can be much more effective than a larger group, so we encourage you to consider this option. Formality and arrangements will increase with the size of the group you plan.

You might wish to make the session more structured where you meet online together as a group to discuss a topic of interest, for example, if an assignment is due, you may wish to discuss the questions and how to approach it. By agreeing a topic in advance of the meeting, it can provide a structure for the session, and encourage everyone to contribute. It also brings the group together to work on a topic of common interest.

Study group topics

Towards the end of the semester, you will probably want to spend a session on exam advice. Good materials are available from the induction resources available on the



University's website, see <http://induction.uhi.ac.uk/>. You may also wish to use these resources for other sessions throughout the year. The diagram provides other examples of topics that could be covered in study group sessions.

Finally, please enjoy your study group! Let us know how you get on, or if you would like any help, email us at studentengagement@uhi.ac.uk.