More Heads are Better Than One — Getting the Most Out of Study Groups

The aphorism “two heads are better than one” is good advice and supported by academic research – Light (2001) found that “students who met in small groups of four to six, even just once a week, to discuss their homework are “far more engaged and far better prepared, and they learn significantly more” (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, 2005, p. 250). Whether you call it collaborative, partner, small-group, or team learning, study groups are effective because study groups utilize pedagogic methods that work.

Tips for Forming Study Groups

• **Common expectations** – agreement about study group objectives or purpose critical. Connect individual member goals to study group goals to maintain commitment and maximize outcomes.

• **Be selective** – choose group members that are motivated, good note takers, participate in class, have different backgrounds and skill sets (i.e., cover all your bases).

• **Right sizing your group** – 3-5 members is an optimal group size as it is easier to coordinate schedules, have everyone participate, and get a diverse perspective.

• **Leadership** – make a decision about who will be the study group leader each session – 1 group leader or take turns (hint – taking turns is fair and develops everyone’s skills). Study groups provide opportunities to develop and refine leadership skills. The leader is responsible for sending the study group agenda – what you will do in that week’s meeting – to all study group members. Also think about appointing a rotating scribe to keep study group “minutes.”

• **Logistics** – establish a time, day, place, and duration (1-1.5 hr maximum) of the study group session. Ideally meet **once a week** to keep on pace with class material. Avoid areas prone to distraction (e.g., lower RTUC). Exchange contact information - email addresses, cell phone numbers.

• **Establish group rules** – study group members are expected to come prepared (sponges are not welcome), be punctual, remain on task, contribute, actively listen without interruption, show respect for other group members, use constructive criticism, ask questions and critique ideas.
• **Study Group Format** – briefly review last session to establish context, work on current issues (concepts, problems, present cases, critique presentations, practice problems, review questions, etc.), wrap-up / summary of the current session, and decide about next week’s study group agenda (e.g., test review). Topics or material covered each week is determined in collaboration with other group members.

• **Evaluate** – after a test, returned classwork, etc. discuss how the study group helped / didn’t help members excel. Post-mortem is effective means of enhancing or redirecting the focus of the study group.

**Benefits of Study Groups**

**Opportunities to:**
- exchange notes.
- create concept maps.
- share study tips and strategies.
- more time to practice material.
- less boring than studying alone.
- get different perspectives on the material.
- ask questions in a less threatening environment.
- ideal for exam preparation & question identification.
- learn new study habits and strategies from other successful students.
- others understand what you don’t and can explain it to you from a student perspective.
- give you a “pick me up” or motivate when your motivation lags over the semester.
- provide you multiple ways to learn the material (i.e., learning styles).
- hone your teaching and leadership skills, as well as your depth of understanding by helping others learn.

**Caveats and other warnings:**
- don’t let the study group become a social / party group.
- don’t allow the study session to become a “gripe session about teachers and courses.”
• don’t allow unprepared members to participate or continue working with the group.
• don’t allow one or a few members to dominate the group.
• reflect on what you are getting out of the group – study groups aren’t for everyone.

It should come as no surprise that who you choose spend time with will significantly impact your college outcomes and experiences – so “what crowd do you want to run with?”

Resources: