

# Learning Through Study Groups

## Introduction

A new term and concept has made its appearance in educational literature in the past six years: study groups. Study groups have been hailed as a creative method for staff development, as a way to promote the professionalization of teachers, and as a technique to foster school restructuring. It is true that effective study groups can accomplish each of these goals, and, when done well, all three simultaneously.

Study groups offer participants the opportunity to learn and apply new ideas in the teaching-learning experience. They promote substantive interaction with colleagues for problem solving. They can provide a forum for different perspectives and ideas. A powerful result of effective study groups is the support participants receive as they explore how best to teach children for meaningful learning.

The intent of this first section of ASCD's Professional Inquiry Kit is to explore the definitions and purposes of study groups. Here, we present information on how to organize your own study groups, show how to make them work, and suggest what their content should be. We also discuss ideas for ensuring the success of your study group.

If you are already experienced in the formation and uses of educational study groups, including establishing norms, meeting challenges, and dealing with group dynamics, proceed to the next section, "Using This ASCD Professional Inquiry Kit."

## Definition

A study group is a collection of people who gather together to examine a topic they have agreed to study. Groups are often formed out of a recognized need or interest. Professional educators often initiate study groups in recognition of the importance to constantly be learners themselves. Study groups afford participants a forum for learning together, planning together, testing ideas together, and reflecting together. The following are general characteristics of study groups:

- Participants in study groups construct knowledge through research, interaction with selected materials, and collegial discourse.

- All participants acknowledge that each person brings expertise to the group and that everyone has a contribution to make. Study groups provide an avenue for renewal, an atmosphere of companionship, and an opportunity for growth.
- Participants make a commitment to create new knowledge and to use this knowledge to positively affect perspectives, policies, and practice.

## Purpose

Study groups can have a variety of purposes. Educators often form study groups to learn and apply new teaching techniques. For instance, you and your colleagues might have attended a conference session on cooperative learning and want to try this approach in your classrooms. Forming a study group can help you learn more about this technique and provide a forum for analyzing your attempts to implement it.

Study groups can concentrate on researching educational topics. You and your colleagues can organize them to solve problems you encounter every day. You can form study groups to study or investigate any topic, problem, or idea. Professional study groups can study research on effective schools and teaching in an effort to make wiser, research-based decisions.

The key to successful study groups is that all participants must agree on the purpose, and they must be committed to that purpose and feel that it is worthwhile. All participants must feel that they are engaged in a meaningful activity for their professional or personal edification. These two criteria ensure that the purpose is accepted and important to the group—critical elements for successful professional inquiry.

Regardless of your group's stated purpose (such as to improve instruction in language arts), you may have outcomes that you do not anticipate. For example, you and your colleagues may develop a sense of collegiality. Your group may create a sense of security to ask for assistance and to experiment with new ideas. Through working on a common goal, you and your colleagues develop mutual respect. Study groups provide the support that many teachers find difficult to obtain in the isolation of their classrooms.

# Organizing Study Groups

## Getting Started

Who decides to use the study-group method? This decision can be made by a single person, who invites others to participate, or by groups of people who realize that this format can meet an identified need. An administrator can even start study groups. Whoever starts the process, the participants must eventually adopt the group as their own and assume all responsibility for making it succeed. It is the participants who should make decisions about both the content and process of their study group.

Your study group should include no more than six people. The larger your group, the more difficult it is to find common meeting times. The smaller the group, the more each member will participate and take responsibility. Who should be members of your group? The content or focus of the study you want to undertake determines the membership, not necessarily grade level, job function, or subject-matter focus of the members. Study group members may have similar responsibilities (e.g., 1st grade teachers, math teachers, elementary principals) or may have unlike responsibilities (e.g., across grade level, across subject area, across schools and districts). Members of your group should have interests and needs in common.

## Establishing a Schedule of Times and Places

The first task you must tackle as a group is to set up a regular schedule of meetings—and agree to keep it. You need a set schedule to protect the time from other intrusions and to reinforce the importance of this activity. Other responsibilities, both personal and professional, constantly vie for our time and attention. You and your fellow group members must be able to count on each other's commitment to the project if you are to successfully engage in an in-depth exploration of a topic. (See Appendix A for a suggested agenda for the first meeting of your study group.)

1. Decide on a time schedule. Study groups usually meet once a week or once every two weeks for one or two hours. You need to set the dates and times of meetings for as long as you and your colleagues estimate that you will need. If you believe that the task will take the entire school year, you might specify that you will meet every Tuesday from 3 to 4 p.m. or every other Tuesday from 3 to 5. Other study groups have found that it is better to meet more frequently for shorter periods of time. More than two weeks between meetings makes it difficult to sustain momentum. An hour is about the minimum amount of time that should be allotted for each session.

2. Choose a meeting site and make arrangements to secure the site over an extended period of time. Study groups in schools often use an empty classroom or teachers' lounge. This is convenient when members of the group are all from the same school. If your group includes members from several different locations, you may decide to rotate the location of meetings. Conference rooms at the Board of Education are sometimes available. Study groups have even been known to gather at the homes of individual members. Though someone's home is a comfortable and intimate setting, keep in mind that meeting in neutral and businesslike locations emphasizes the serious nature of your work.

## Establishing Group Norms

After agreeing on a schedule of sites, dates, and times, your group needs to establish norms. Collectively agree on what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the group setting, such as the following:

- Beginning and ending on time.
- Taking responsibility for one's own learning.
- Being an active participant.
- Letting what is said in the group stay in the group.
- Not judging others' opinions.
- Respecting others' opinions.
- Completing assignments.
- Being open to changing the status quo.
- Practicing active listening skills.

Once you establish norms you can agree on, you should encourage group members to feel comfortable about reminding each other that a norm is not being respected. Some groups have found that a chart of the norms posted prominently at each meeting helps participants to remember their standards of group behavior.

## Making an Action Plan

You and your group members should develop an action plan. If there are 10 professional study groups in the school or district, there will be 10 action plans. Even if another group, such as a department or a district office, identifies the problem you are studying, it is up to your group to decide how to go about your investigation. An action plan helps you stay on task, plan ahead, and keep focused on the group goal. Your plan should not be a detailed schedule of activities but a broad framework that you can refer to as the

group progresses. It can serve as a reminder of the purpose of the group and keep members focused. Your group's action plan might include:

- A clearly stated problem. For example: Teachers and students are not comfortable using the computer for instructional purposes.
- Intended results of the study for group members. For example: Members will learn and implement strategies that use the computer for instructional purposes.
- Intended results of the study for students, if appropriate. For example: Students will engage in lessons that use the computer as a tool for learning.
- Timeline. For example: The group will meet every week for six months.
- Resources. For example: articles, videos, audios, artifacts, ASCD Professional Inquiry Kits, and so forth.

## Identifying Group Leadership

Leadership of the study group can take a variety of forms. At your first meeting, you should establish who is going to take leadership and whether this person will remain the leader throughout the study period. Some groups choose one person to facilitate all the meetings as a result of his or her specialized expertise in the topic or recognized organizational skills. The preferred method, however, is to establish a schedule for study group leadership in which each member serves as leader on a rotating basis. This process confirms the notion that each member is both a learner and a leader and that the group is working together toward its own goals. Shared leadership makes everyone responsible for the success of the group. Shared leadership prompts individual group members to look to themselves and to each other for direction. Leadership may rotate weekly, biweekly, or monthly.

The leader for a given meeting is responsible for confirming logistics (e.g., time, location, refreshments) with all members, for gathering any materials that the group has indicated a need for, and for calling the meeting to order. In many study groups, leadership often begins with an individual and evolves into shared accountability.

## Making Study Groups Work

### Selecting Content

The issues or topics that you pursue as a group can spring from a variety of sources. Group members may choose the content, or others outside the group may identify the topic. The topic or issues may have immediate relevance to group members, or the issues may deal with long-range educational concerns. As a group, you should either formulate your own areas of inquiry or, at the least, be able to define

an imposed topic in a way that makes sense and is meaningful to you.

Professional study groups often use research as a basis for study-group work. As your group members work with their peers to become more knowledgeable about teaching and learning practices, they refine and extend their teaching skills. Study groups that concentrate on research-based practices become actively involved in collecting and analyzing data that come from their own schools and classrooms. For example, a group of teachers formed a study group to collect information and data on several approaches to school improvement, looking at the work of Lawrence Lezotte, James Comer, Henry Levin, and Theodore Sizer. Taking a school year for readings, visitations, attending conferences, and viewing videos gave the group members the opportunity to analyze and determine the merits of each approach and to decide how to use the information to improve their school.

Study groups can be formed to monitor the implementation of innovations. Study groups can assist members in practicing the innovation. During the implementation of a new educational program, group members might collect and analyze data over a period of time to determine if the innovation is having its intended result. For instance, you could form a group to evaluate the implementation of a thematic approach to instruction. You and your colleagues want to learn more about thematic organization and want to determine if children learn more when knowledge is presented in this way. This type of study is often referred to as action research, and your study group becomes an action research group.

Most organizations and individuals have a process for identifying areas of need. You can form a study group around a specific need, and the members will be people who have a desire to address that need. For example, if you are a new teacher struggling to manage students with special needs, you may enlist other teachers with a similar need to work together over a period of time to resolve or lessen the problem. Or your district may determine through the strategic-planning process that the district does not have in place a performance-based approach for evaluating teacher performance; or your school faculty may decide that they need to investigate more effective methods of reporting student progress. Once the problem or need is identified, professional study groups may be aligned with the task.

## Overcoming Challenges

Time, money, and lack of commitment are the chief barriers to successful study groups. To overcome these barriers, you need creativity, perseverance, and a belief in the efficacy of this form of learning. We know that professional development should take place at the local level and be focused on local concerns. Study groups are a natural way to address both these areas.

It is not easy to find time for professional study groups to meet. There will never be enough time to do all that edu-

cators need to do. The benefits of holding study groups become clear, however, when people find that the time they spend in a study group reduces the amount of time they spend alone developing lessons, making instructional plans, or keeping up on the current literature. Then keeping to a regular meeting time becomes less of a problem. When your group members believe that the knowledge gained from the group will improve their teaching skills and benefit students, you will all make more of an effort to find the time. You and your group must become creative in finding time for collaboration. Suggested strategies include:

- Beginning school late one day a week.
- Releasing early one day a week.
- Using faculty meeting time for study group time.
- Substituting other types of meetings for study group time.
- Breaking "staff development days" into hours and stretching those hours over a span of time.
- Using resource people to release teachers when groups meet once a week.

Gaining the support of administrators is crucial to making your study group work. To use the preceding strategies for finding time, you need the backing of your principal or other administrators. Further, if you are to feel secure in applying the skills you learn in the study group, you need to know that the administration supports a climate of experimentation.

Meeting on personal time is always an option for study groups. This is certainly not the preferred course; but often the benefits of working together on instructional problems and learning how to improve the learning experience together are worth the sacrifice of a few hours each month.

## Dealing with Group Dynamics

Because most study groups are voluntary in nature, group process challenges are usually few and relatively easy to deal with. Study group members are vested in this learning opportunity; and because the content is relevant, it tends to dominate interactions. You and your colleagues must concentrate on the substance of the content, not personalities. The professional nature of the inquiry should "rule" the processes you use.

Establishing norms, as mentioned previously, is an objective way to reinforce positive behavior. Norms allow you to remind each other of accepted conduct without feeling diminished or out of order. By spending time at the

beginning developing group norms, you can avoid many problems down the road.

Some groups like to appoint a process observer at the start of each meeting. This person makes observations during the course of the meeting, as necessary, and at the conclusion. Making this a formal responsibility allows objective comment on behavior without the onus of being "the enforcer." Your group members should view their participation as they would participation in any meeting or group—each has an individual responsibility to the group to be productive and to help others be productive.

Sometimes techniques such as the use of tokens or task cards can facilitate group processes. (See Appendix B for directions.)

## Ending a Study Group

Your study group is in control of its longevity. You and your colleagues decide when your goals have been accomplished, and for how long you should continue to meet. At the onset of the group, you will have agreed to a commitment of a specific number of meetings; then you may discuss extensions as you work. You must schedule enough meetings to allow your group to become a unit and to work productively together.

Sometimes members leave and others join during the course of the group inquiry. If this happens in your group, make sure that the cohesion and effectiveness of the group are not impaired when changes are made. If possible, identify specific natural breaking points in the inquiry to allow members who find they are unable to continue to withdraw and others to be added.

Some groups meet for a set number of times (for instance, every other Tuesday during the school year), and others meet until their goals are accomplished. You may find that exploration of one topic leads naturally into inquiry into other areas; and you may continue the study group with changing subjects for an extended period of time.

The duration of your study group depends on your members. They are in control of their own learning. Your group has the responsibility to manage itself.

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