

An Overview of a Study Group

A study group planning to use “Section 2: A Guided Workshop” in the *Enhancing Academic Success* booklet will need to follow certain important guidelines in order to make its efforts worthwhile and productive. The suggestions described below are grouped into two areas: setting up a study group and strategies for working effectively in a study group.

Setting up Your Study Group

What is a study group?

A group of people who regularly come together over an extended period of time to study a particular issue. A study group is ongoing, collaborative, and inquiry-based in the nature of the process. The process allows for generative understanding that is deeper, longer lasting, and more pertinent to the circumstances of each member of the group.

(National Service-Learning and Assessment Study Group, 1999)

Before the study group is formed and resources are devoted to the initiative, key stakeholders will need to be clear on the purpose and outcomes of the study group. It is recommended that the purpose be based on LEP student learning and some visible data, such as student enrollment in programs, LEP student achievement, or student drop-out rates. Once the purpose of the group has been determined, that message will need to be translated to the various individuals who will be invited to participate in the study group.

Once the group has formed, the purpose and the goal(s) will need to be defined more clearly. All group members have some essential information or perspective to share in achieving the goal. A set of guiding questions may provide more specific information to group members, allowing them to gain an understanding of the time necessary to answer the questions. For example, if a study group deems it necessary to look at how LEP students progress in their learning through the effective use of technology, the group may look more specifically at the process of LEP students’ learning in certain subject areas or skill sets in which technology is frequently used.

Three key factors that need to be considered while setting up a study group:

- Purpose of the study group
- Size and make-up of the group
- Action plan development

Next, the group size and make-up must be considered. If a study group is too large, it may be beneficial to break up the group into subgroups. For example, in a group that comprises teachers at different levels, teachers' interaction may be more productive if they are placed in subgroups according to their grade levels, (i.e., primary, intermediate, or secondary). A study group can transform into a successful learning community if it is well designed. It is critical that a variety of staff members be represented in the group. Bilingual, ESL, or content-area teachers are necessary members, but so are administrators, technology specialists, and LEP and curriculum directors. These representative stakeholders should be able to build upon the learning community's direction to support schoolwide efforts.

Developing an action plan for the group will reinforce the purpose and goal(s) of the group. Teachers and principals are already overwhelmed with the demands for additional meetings consuming much of their free time. In order to reduce as much frustration and conflict due to competing demands, the study group will need to clearly lay out a realistic timeframe, topics to be discussed, as well as time for sharing, reflecting, evaluating, and revising, which becomes a cyclical process. For example, at the beginning of the group study, the group may be more focused on LEP student success using a specific software program as a center station in an engaged-learning environment. As the group progresses, it may move into actual strategies or steps to be taken to enhance technology use at other center stations extending the content-area learning.

As with managing any professional development group, it is almost impossible to predict specific needs of a study group and how many meetings the group will need in order to address those concerns. Therefore, each group needs to recognize its own uniqueness to establish realistic goals and truly make a positive change.

Strategies for Working Effectively in a Study Group

All educators agree that time is an extremely limited resource. Given the reality of limited time for professional development, prior to a meeting time study group members should be given an agenda that not only lists the topics to be addressed but also clearly states the goal(s) and purpose. The goals should be realistic in scope for the time allotted. In addition, group leaders should decide what activities can realistically be done at the meeting and which activities can be done between meetings. For example, instead of group

Strategies and structures for a positive, productive study group

Groups need to:

- Make the most of the limited time available .
- Discuss and develop a mutual understanding of ways to solve disagreements.
- Develop structures for exchanging information on specific topics.

members watching the video, *Enhancing Academic Success Through Technology for Limited-English-Proficient Students*, and then discussing it at a meeting, it may be more efficient for them to watch the video with a small group of teachers prior to the meeting, and then the whole group can come together to discuss it. It is recommended that group members have specific questions or issues in mind as they discuss a topic. Having a well-defined rationale for the meeting will help to ensure that certain group members will not get the entire group “off-track.” If possible, provide some time at all meetings for general comments and feedback, so that if any group members feel a dire need to share an issue not identified on the agenda, they will be afforded the opportunity.

Many of the issues revolving around the education of LEP students are sensitive and can cause a number of heated discussions and disagreements. In order to reduce the number and length of discussions that may be counterproductive to the group, there are various mechanisms the members can implement that will directly address these situations. For example, the purpose of the study group should be frequently restated so that everyone in the group is on the same track. If there is disagreement about an issue that cannot be resolved immediately, have the group clearly define the issue and then schedule it for future discussions creating a subgroup between now and then to gather relevant information that will help shed light on the issue. Other teachers can also be asked what their experience has been related to the disputed issue.

The study group may need to learn how to have an honest and productive discussion about one of the specific issues related to the education of LEP students. To create an environment in which honest and productive dialogue can occur, groups can take various steps. Early on, groups are encouraged to establish a formal set of protocols for exchanging feedback. The goal of a discussion protocol is to reduce the anxiety and personalization that sometimes occurs in a group discussion among members. Discussions are not to be deterred but rather should be constructive in nature. Then, as groups form and begin to exchange information, it is recommended that group members establish roles. For example, a group may want to identify a timekeeper, recorder, and moderator for each meeting. It will be important each time for the moderator to review the agenda and purpose of the meeting, and to provide all group members with an opportunity to be heard. Finally, group

members must decide what information to share and how to share that information. Not all information may need to be shared during the study group. In reality, much information could be shared via e-mail or on paper prior to the meeting or as a follow-up.

Effective communication and collaboration are the foundation for effective change. When each member of the study group honors the purpose of the study and its collaborative nature, the results will be a positive step toward a stronger learning community and school improvement efforts for LEP students.

This study-group overview was adapted from *Teacher to Teacher: Reshaping Instruction Through Lesson Study* by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory and the North Central Eisenhower Mathematics and Science Consortium. Copyright © 2002 by the authors. Adapted with permission.

References

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