

## **USING STUDY GROUPS TO FACILITATE LEARNING IN FOUNDATIONS COURSES**

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Undoubtedly, study groups which meet outside of class time (for one hour a week) make a significant difference to student success. A Harvard study found that the single best predictor of whether a first year student in science stayed in science and graduated was whether s/he joined a study group. For social science students, such groups offer an excellent arena in which to discuss course readings, prepare for tutorials and exams, and do group projects. Study groups help students improve their critical skills, teach them to work collaboratively, and increase their confidence with course material and tutorial participation.

For first year students, these groups help with the transition from high school with its greater focus on teacher-directed and in-class learning to the university where the emphasis is on student-directed and outside-of-class learning. Such groups also offer a context in which first-year students especially, who may not know anyone, can make new friends.

For those courses which raise personal issues for students (such as women's studies), study groups offer a vehicle for students to talk about difficult issues that arise in relation to course material. Having a reference group sympathetic to the course material and the dilemmas it produces in their lives may lessen the emphasis on their personal lives in class, decrease difficult (and often inappropriate) self-disclosure in the tutorial, and reduce the tendency for students to seek personal counselling from tutorial leaders.

Find below the student handout I have developed for use in Sosc 1185. It explains to students how to organize their study groups, and offers some discussion questions for the first five sessions.

### **SETTING UP STUDY GROUPS**

In the first tutorial, study groups can be set up. Research shows that teacher support in setting up and maintaining study groups is important to their success. Although TAs do not attend study group sessions, their interest in and support for these groups will make a big difference to their success.

Explain the importance of the study groups. Give students 15-20 mins to talk to the members of the group, read over any handouts on the study groups, and plan their first meeting.

Some suggestions for setting up the groups: first divide students by residence and commuter students, and then identify who can come at what times during week. The most popular meeting times are before and after lecture and tutorial so it helps to start this way. Encourage students to have email conversations in the weeks when their group is unable to meet.

### **MONITORING THE STUDY GROUPS**

In the first four weeks of tutorial, TAs should set aside a few minutes for reports from the study groups on the question for that week. Also take some time over the year to hear how they are functioning. In order to encourage bonding among study group members and facilitate their working together, TAs can organize students by study groups for class exercises and break-out groups.

TAs can also assign tutorial assignments by study group; for example, ask a study group to bring questions about or comments on one week's readings to the tutorial, once or twice a year. You might also consider a

'check in' at the beginning or end of class where students meet briefly with their study groups with a guided 'check in' exercise.

Where activist education is part of your course, tutorial leaders might encourage study groups to attend events together (such as an International Women's Day March) and report back to the tutorial.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY GROUPS**

The Math Department at York has developed several useful handouts on study groups.

"Why Study Groups are Important" (for students) at <http://www.math.yorku.ca/undergrad/sgImp.htm>

"Study Group Guide for Students" by Katie Caldwell at <http://www.math.yorku.ca/new/undergrad/sgGuide.htm>

"Study Group Guide for Professors and Teaching Assistants" by Katie Caldwell at <http://www.math.yorku.ca/new/undergrad/sgGuideTA.htm>.

The focus of this text is on running tutorial style groups.

## **STUDY GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

For the first five meetings of your study group, please discuss these questions for part of your hour together. Your tutorial leader will be interested in feedback on these discussions.

### **WEEK ONE QUESTION**

How do family and friends react to your taking a course entitled "Women and Society"? How would you explain their reactions? How do you respond to them?

### **WEEK TWO QUESTION**

We are surrounded by images of women on billboards, in print advertising, in the movies and on TV. What are the common characteristics of the images of women? Are these images realistic? How do these images/women make you feel? Do you think they present positive role models for women?

### **WEEK THREE QUESTION**

Imagine an ordinary weekend. You spend time with friends, go shopping, maybe go out to a club or dancing. Maybe you have dinner at a restaurant and see a movie with your partner. On Sunday you and your partner have brunch with your parents. You use public transportation. On one occasion, you meet someone that you work with and introduce your partner to this person.

Imagine this weekend as a heterosexual couple. Imagine this weekend as a lesbian couple. Discuss the differences.

## **WEEK FOUR QUESTION**

Describe one way you have experienced or witnessed inequality in your own life, or in the lives of families, friends and/or community. What conclusions can your group draw based on these experiences?

## **WEEK FIVE QUESTION**

In your view, what is a feminist? How would you define feminism? Try to identify how you came to have these views. On what basis and from where did you develop these views?

Would you call yourself a feminist? Why or why not? Do you see any risks or rewards from identifying yourself as a feminist?