

What Happens When Students Study Together?

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I'm a strong believer in the benefits of students studying together, even though students don't always understand or even experience the benefits. Oftentimes the potential gains of group study sessions are compromised by student behaviors. Students will saunter into study sessions, mostly not on time, sit around, check their phones, and socialize. When they finally start reviewing their notes, the text, or the homework problems, it's all pretty superficial. There are very few questions, explanations, or confessions of confusion. The most intense conversation takes place over what they've heard from others about the exam and their hopes that it will be easy.

If students studied more seriously, many (actually I think it's most) of them would benefit enormously from study groups. Working with others provides a safe place to ask questions and admit confusion. Often it's easier for students to understand each other than the teacher. When students figure out things on their own, that builds confidence. And when students explain things to each other, the student doing the explaining comes to a deeper understanding.

What students need when they study together is guidance. But who among us has time to organize and manage study groups? I've been trying to think of some efficient ways teachers can improve how students study together. Your help with the list of options would be appreciated.

Encourage collaboration

- Make the case for study groups. Explain to your students why and how study groups improve exam performance for most students.
- Demonstrate the benefits by using groups during in-class review. See the list of activities below for ideas.
- Let students form the groups and figure out the logistics: who, how many, and meeting times, including frequency and length. One study buddy is better than none.



- Offer to connect students who'd like to study with others.
- Emphasize studying together as part of exam preparation for one exam, challenging students to see if getting together as a group helps them learn.

Activities students can do when they study together

- Generate potential exam questions or problems. Each group member works with a chunk of content, preparing possible test questions or problems the group uses to test their knowledge and understanding.
- Facilitate discussion of notes. Each group member is responsible for one or more class session(s). That person then leads the group's discussion of the designated content, identifies what's most important, where there's related material in the text, and how that content fits with other material that's been covered.
- Prepare study guides. Each group member takes a section of text and prepares review materials for the rest of the group.
- "Grade" answers. Provide groups with the responses to sample essay questions and let students grade them. Their discussion can help generate a grading criteria for essay answers.
- Determine what's likely to be on the test. The group constructs a list of content areas, concepts, or details that everyone in the group agrees they'll need to know for the exam.

Offer guidelines that make study sessions productive

- Members arrive on time; the session starts and ends on time.
- Students get together regularly for shorter sessions rather than for one marathon study session before a big exam.
- Make an agenda; members decide beforehand what the group will be doing.
- Group members come prepared. Everyone is expected to contribute. Those who don't contribute are constructively confronted.
- The group doesn't waste time. Socializing, checking phones, and other disruptive actions are kept to a minimum. It's about the content.
- Members treat each other with respect; no one is demeaned when they are confused or have trouble understanding a concept even after it's been explained.
- There's a spirit of sharing. People help each other.
- Members do what the group needs. If the discussion is off track, someone gets the group back on task. If someone is not contributing, their participation is invited.

Provide possible incentives

- If everyone in the group scores above a certain level, everyone in the groups receives a designated number of points.
- Make study group participation an optional, extra-credit assignment. Groups must register with you and report on their sessions (who was there, what they did), and each member writes a short paper after the exam, reflecting on his or her experience. If all that happens, it counts as an assignment.
- Groups may submit potential exam questions. Those questions that show up on the exam are identified as "group questions," and if everyone in the group gets the question correct, they get a bonus point.
- Allow groups who are registered and meet regularly to take one of the quizzes as a group with everyone receiving the group grade.

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