



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Study Groups*

“Could teachers gather around the great thing called ‘teaching and learning’ and explore its mysteries with the same respect we accord any subject worth knowing?”

Parker J. Palmer, 1997

The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, p. 141

WHY STUDY GROUPS?

Many teachers feel that they are too busy with the demands of teaching, testing, grading papers, and attending mandated professional development workshops to even think about beginning a study group. In fact, the concept of study groups has grown out of the needs of just such busy educators. Effective study groups create a support system designed specifically to meet teachers' most urgent daily challenges; and the synergistic effect resulting from collaboration becomes infectious, not only in the group but throughout the school.

Individually, teachers find renewed energy as they solve problems related to their own students and classroom practices, leading directly to an increased sense of efficacy and empowerment. This ownership and engagement produce enthusiasm that transfers directly to classrooms. In addition, the hallmark of study groups, on-going problem solving, often begins a cycle of action research as groups use data to explore questions and meet challenges in a timely and efficient way.

The greatest benefit, however, comes from the boost to student achievement, according to Murphy and Lick (2001), authors of *Whole Faculty Study Groups*. Several studies also support this important finding; see, for example, Charles, Clark, Roudebush, Budnick, Brown, & Turner (1995), Joyce, Murphy, Showers, & Murphy (1989), and Bradley (1993). If schools had to choose one professional development vehicle that has the capacity to make the greatest contribution to teachers, faculties and students, study groups would be at the top of the list.

WHAT IS A STUDY GROUP?

Although there are various types of study groups and various ways of organizing study groups, a workable and concise definition might be that a study group is a small group of individuals who meet on a frequent and regular basis to explore the interests of the group based on the needs of the school or students. Study groups differ from traditional forms of professional development in that the group determines the content of the study based on student data, shared interests, or professional curiosity concerning a new theory or practice. Small groups may be formed within the whole faculty, as Murphy and Lick suggest, or study groups can be initiated by grade levels, content areas, or among faculty members with common interests. District-wide study groups may also be formed with a cross-section of literacy coaches, teachers, or administrators meeting for a variety of purposes. In *Redefining Staff Development*, Laura Robb (2000) notes that study groups are different from traditional courses of study in these ways:

- Curriculum is negotiated: participants have input into what is studied.
- Teachers learn by doing.
- Experiences relate to the classroom and teachers' inquiries.
- Inquiry drives the meetings.
- Frequency and length of meetings are negotiated.
- Goals are to improve teaching, improve students' learning and enlarge theoretical base.

- Assessment links what teachers learn about students to the kinds of learning experiences students receive.

GETTING STARTED

Once a group decides that they want to participate in a study group, they can make the process much more efficient by using one of a variety of published formats. The only principle that cannot be compromised is the commitment of the group to identifying and addressing student needs. If the purpose of the study group is to increase student learning and this basic premise remains at the forefront, the rewards will be immense. Following are some common guidelines that study groups can utilize when getting started:

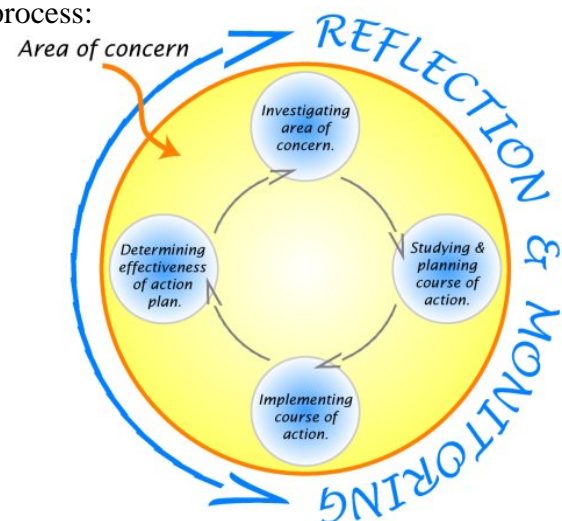
- Keep the size of the study group small. Murphy and Lick suggest between three and six members.
- Form groups based on common interests.
- Create ground rules that keep meetings consistent.
- Create guiding principles that keep meetings focused.
- Develop a study group action plan.
- Keep a regular schedule, meeting at least every two weeks; once a week is preferable.
- Provide time for each member to reflect in writing.
- Use student data, both formal and informal, to guide observations and form next steps.
- Make a practice of bringing student work samples to meetings to share.
- Collect and utilize all professional resources available, such as FLARE coordinators and modules, professional books, and current articles.
- Develop roles for members of the group
- Establish a pattern of study group leadership, by either rotating the role or choosing one person for the duration of the study.
- Encourage dialogue and reflection within meetings.
- Celebrate successes and newly formed relationships.
- Create and maintain an atmosphere of openness, trust and respect.

THE STUDY GROUP PROCESS

The study group's first task is to brainstorm and select a topic by examining student data to determine need. Participants may agree that there is a general problem, for example, that students appear to have trouble comprehending what they are reading in content area classes. Allow everyone to voice concerns, challenges, and strengths while the recorder charts responses. Then, decide what data and artifacts should be examined to narrow the focus. For example, the group might decide to bring to the next meeting such items as teacher observational notes, FCAT data, teacher-made tests, informal reading inventories, book check-out lists from the library, time spent in independent reading, student writing samples, or comments from students. At the next meeting, members should look carefully at the data and clearly state the study question or problem. Only then is the group ready to form an action plan. Sample action plans may include the following:

- Common study of a professional book or articles that address the problem.
- Professional development workshops provided by someone knowledgeable about the topic.
- Implementation of various strategies that address the topic.
- Observations of model teachers in other classes, schools or districts.
- Coaching for specific strengths and needs in the targeted area.
- Action research projects focused on a specific area of concern.
- Analysis of more student data.

FLaRE's graphic shows the ongoing study group process:



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Time

The most common challenge for forming and maintaining study groups can be summarized in one word: time. As Randy Bomer (1995) notes in his book, *Time for Meaning*, “Time cannot be controlled like a car or television set. Time just is. What can be controlled, by ourselves or by others, is our ability or freedom to choose our actions, to formulate our own plans and carry them out” (p. 41). If we think in terms of *making* wise and efficient use of the time we have been allotted, rather than in *finding* time, we may be more successful in overcoming this challenge. In fact, time is used more efficiently by focusing on the most pressing needs in classrooms and schools and by addressing those needs through a study group.

Tips for Making Time:

- Ask your district or principal if there are professional development funds to pay teachers stipends for after-school study group time.
- Use common planning time, half-days, or after school hours to meet more frequently for shorter periods of time.
- Include study group time in your professional development plans or school improvement plans so that study groups are viewed as official school business.

Commitment

In looking at the habits of effective people, Stephen Covey (1989) reminds us that “there are some things over which we have no real control and others that we can do something about” (p. 82). He suggests spending our valuable time and energy on those things that we can influence. There will be at least a small group of committed people in every school who will be willing to engage in a study group. Spend time with those who are committed to the process. Eventually, you will become a solid group of colleagues who will lend support and encouragement as you learn together. Laura Robb (2000) advises:

...choice is necessary for professional study to be an effective mode of growth and change. Choice is at the heart of making a commitment: an invitation to join a study group or work with a peer respects teachers’ right to accept or decline.

It also allows teachers who are skeptical about change to be observers and listeners and to talk to colleagues who are actively involved in professional learning before making a personal commitment. (p. 3)

Tips for Developing Commitment:

- Honor differences.
- Listen to each other.
- Practice patience.

Group Dynamics

This issue of group dynamics may require a skillful facilitator, depending upon the make-up of the group, the school environment and, to some degree, the constantly changing challenges inherent in school life. Forming a strong group that listens, respects each other’s views, and engages in honest, respectful inquiry takes time and practice. It may also be helpful to spend time laying the foundation for study by first examining techniques for group interaction. As Parker Palmer (1998) points out in *The Courage to Teach*, “If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard” (p. 151). If the group begins to dissolve into dissention, it may be time to wander back into your circle of influence and spend the next study group session reading Parker Palmer’s calming book or jigsawing articles written by Robert Garmston on the challenges of creating effective groups.

Tips for Positive Group Dynamics

- For a variety of articles on effective group practices visit: <http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/garmston.cfm> .
- Read “Guidelines for Encouraging Dialogue, Listening and Communication” on pages 128-131 of *Teacher Study Groups*.

CONCLUSION

Teachers are innate seekers, original inquirers who thrive by learning; so study groups provide a practical and authentic way for teachers to engage in personal and professional development. The greatest benefit of study groups, however, will be evident in the classroom as students share, by association, their teachers’ study group experience.

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