

Virtual Study Groups: Guidance for Faculty

Instructors are doing their best to encourage instructor-student and student-student interactions in their courses. In fully remote learning environments, use of study groups are an important tool to foster student connections and student success in learning.

Students who regularly participate in effective study groups may earn higher grades than they would studying alone. They also tend to be more actively involved in their courses and have a better grasp of course material.

Suggestions for Instructors

We do not suggest that instructors lead or manage student study groups, but rather prompt or initiate them. One important reason is to send a message of inclusion that study groups are for *all* students.

- Determine whether to assign study groups or assigned times for open groups
 - Schedule regular study group meeting times (via recurring meetings in Zoom), allow drop-in participation; consider how many meeting times you will need to keep groups small.
 - Assign students to study groups of 8 or less, then let the group decide when to meet
- Discuss group rules during class.
 - Clarify what work may be done as a group (repeat frequently throughout the semester)
 - Respectful communication (see University of Waterloo resource for phrasing)
 - Whether and how students may change groups
- Discuss common recommendations about how effective study groups operate, such as whether to:
 - Assign/choose study group roles (e.g. Moderator, Note-taker, Timekeeper, Contrarian)
 - Role rotation provides all participants with the opportunity to lead and practice skills, and also avoids stereotypical roles
 - Close out each session with a debriefing by asking “What did we do, learn, or miss?”
 - Create a plan and schedule for the next session, including expected preparation
- Provide guidance, or decide with students, what should be addressed during study group sessions each week, but do not make these mandatory. Faculty guidance can help students to be more efficient, but group members should be able to make their own decisions about topic or focus.
 - Homework problem sets
 - Discussion of readings for comprehension and connections to other course material
 - Topics, problems, or questions that would benefit from multiple perspectives
 - Known bottlenecks to student learning
 - Exercises that need to be practiced before being assessed
 - Peer feedback
 - Review course content (students share notes, review readings)
 - Share goals and challenges to maintain student motivation
 - Shared, but quiet work time
 - Check-ins and mutual accountability
- Participation
 - Study groups should not be mandatory in order to maintain student ownership and autonomy
 - Ask students if they would like to share participant names with you. If so, you might:
 - Provide a way for students to record the date and their names, and/or notes or questions they could not answer; consider using Canvas, Teams, or a Google document.
 - Ask the moderator to share the participants names and/or any questions with you; but again, don’t make the groups mandatory.



- Consider recruiting past students to moderate study groups, especially larger groups
 - Collaborate with your learning center to provide guidance/training for moderators so they model/guide students in their work problems, rather than provide answers
 - Students will be able to add this as leadership experience on their resumes

How-To Create Study Groups

Instructors can use various features of Canvas and Zoom to make study group management easier for them and their students. Utilizing Zoom in conjunction with Canvas provides an opportunity for rich and flexible engagement between students.

There are three primary methods of managing study groups with Penn State technology:

- **Canvas Groups:** Canvas Groups allow students to communicate and share resources within a course. They are appropriate if all students forming study groups are within a course section. Instructors may simply add a “Group Set” and enable “Allow self sign-up” to allow students to manage groups on their own. Detailed instructions are available.
- **Prides:** Prides allow students to create and manage their own groups. They are appropriate for disciplinary study groups that include students from multiple sections or courses. Each individual is limited to creating 10 Prides. Students may add a passcode to Prides and distribute that to study group members.
- **Office 365:** O365 provides a [full suite of collaboration tools](#) that can be useful in student study groups, including document sharing (OneDrive) and asynchronous and synchronous discuss (Teams). Both Faculty and students can setup Teams.

In addition to asynchronous groups in Canvas, [Zoom](#) allows students to engage synchronously via audio or video. There are several considerations when using Zoom for study groups:

- Differences in Time Zones for remote students could create group scheduling issues. Students should be encouraged to take locale into account, or create groups based on similar regions.
- Students might face bandwidth limitations or other condition that discourage enabling their webcams. Instructors should familiarize themselves with [current webcam policies](#).
- Scheduling a regular time for virtual study groups offers a predictable schedule for students and lowers the barrier for casual group drop-ins.
- Add scheduled virtual study groups to the Canvas Calendar and include the Zoom room link so students know where to be and when; scheduling a recurring meeting allows reuse of the link.

Resources for Faculty

- [Group Roles: Maximizing Group Performance](#) , Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo, Canada (excellent example phrasing to help students understand the roles)
- [Suggestions for Holding a Virtual Writing/Learning/Study Group](#), McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning, Princeton University
- [Facilitating Student Connections and Study Partners During Periods of Remote and Online Learning](#), by Geerling, W., Thomas, N., Wooten, J. Social Science Research Network (SSRN), September 13, 2020.
- Guided Study Groups: <https://pennstatelearning.psu.edu/study-groups>



Resources for Students

- [Studying Together Online](#), The Learning Strategies Center, Cornell University
- [Setting Up Virtual Study Groups](#), Student Success, Tulane University
- [Tips for Participating in Group Work & Projects Online](#), Drexel University Online
- [Virtual Study Group Toolkit](#), Teaching and Learning Service, McGill University, Canada
- [Guide to Effective Study Groups \(pdf\)](#), Academic Resource Center, Muhlenberg College
- Academic Success Center, Oregon State University
 - [Conducting Remote Study Groups](#)
 - [Remote Study Group Setup \(pdf\)](#), Learning Corner
 - [Remote Study Group Activities \(pdf\)](#), Learning Corner
- [How to Organize and Conduct Effective Study Groups \(pdf\)](#), Academic Success Center, Bradley University
- [Productive Study Groups - Tips and Tools \(pdf\)](#), Study Skills Resources, Bethel University
- [How to Create an Online Study Group](#), New England College Online

We acknowledge that some of the guidance for faculty in this resource was adapted from the numerous resources listed in the two sections above and R. Neill Johnson, Director, [Penn State Learning](#).