



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 25: How to Make a Study Group Work For You

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles. This is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Adam: Welcome back to learning made easier. This is Episode 25: how to make a study group work for you.

Many teachers will advise students work with their classmates in a word to create a study group. But what do you do in a study group? Too many times study groups can just break down into chit-chat and a waste of your time, instead of improving your knowledge. So in this episode, Dinur and I are going to talk about what makes a study group work well, and how to make it work for you.

Dinur: And the first piece of advice that Adam and I have is that you want to choose a usable meeting space and have a consistent schedule. You want to set something up with your group members, so that you have a set day, and a set time during that day that you can work together. So the first thing you want to do is make sure that your schedules can match up a little bit.

Adam: The second thing is the space itself. It should be mostly quiet, but still a place where it's okay to talk and discuss. So, you don't want to use the main area of the library, because they're going to tell you to be quiet.

But finding a library study room that's ideal. And you want it to have tables and chairs enough that everybody can sit down, and you want available outlets for laptops.

If you are working with a study group that is, say practicing equations, you might want to have a whiteboard or a chalkboard or something where you can write and everybody can look at it. You might even want to just grab a big pad of artists paper and put that on a stand, so that everybody can see what you're doing at once.

Dinur: And like Adam said, these places have to be quiet - so you don't want to use the main part of the library, but a lot of libraries have study rooms that are available for students to use and these are quiet. They usually do have some form of a board - usually it's a whiteboard - where students are supposed to go in and get some studying done.

Adam: Student unions sometimes have study rooms too.

Dinur: If that doesn't work, you can always try and meet at someone's apartment or their house. If you're living in the dorms, dorms tend to have study rooms. You can even go to a fairly social location like a coffee shop or a small restaurant, but I do want to also advise you that you don't want to go to a place that's too loud, that's too distracting. Myself, I like to study with people over food or over coffee, because it's a little bit more relaxed. We're able to discuss material. But it also assumes that all of us are able to focus enough on the material to have it be

Adam: And Dinur and I actually talked about this before we started recording, because for me, a library study room is ideal. There's no distractions. The only noise is coming from the group. And for Dinur, it helps to have some white noise in the background. So you might want to trade off. Maybe this week, you meet in a coffee shop; next week, you meet in the library study room - so that each person gets their own best situation about half the time.

So if a place is too busy or too noisy or if you get distracted by the food and you stop studying and you just, you're eating - not a good place for a study group.

When I was in grad school, one of the places where we would often study was the graduate student lounge, which was really just a little cubicle room that had one table in it. And so we would sit around that, and we'd study.

If you're an undergrad, maybe going to the local coffee shop, not like a Starbucks, but like a coffee shop that has uh, you know, that has food - but go at a time or try to go at a time when it's not, say, the dinner rush or the lunch rush, 'cause it'll be quieter and you'll be able to hear each other better.

Another thing to do, once you've established the place is to designate people whose job it is to keep the group on track - and rotate the roles, change them each time the group meets. So, you really need someone in a study group whose job it is to notice when everybody's kind of drifted off into chit-chat and redirecting them. So you could call this the moderator, or the monitor. And every week, somebody different takes this role. So maybe this week it's Joe's job, and the next week it's Kathy's job, and the week after that Tuan takes over.

But the idea is to rotate these roles, so that no one person is doing it all the time. Remember how annoyed you got at the class monitor in grade school? You don't want to have that happen, but you do want to make sure you stay on track.

Dinur: And you also want someone who's going to be your note-taker. This is especially true if you get credit in class for meeting as a study group. And the note taker has to say who was actually there, right? Who actually showed up, who participated in the study session? Because if credit's on the line, you don't want to give someone credit they haven't earned, and you want to make sure that everyone in the group who's taking this time to meet does actually get rewarded for it.

So the note-taker should make notes of who was there, what was studied, questions that the group still has. Like, maybe there's something, a muddy point, a confusing point, where the group just says, "you know, this doesn't make any sense." The note-taker can always email the teacher and say, "we met, we were discussing this, and we're really confused what this means."

And that, as a teacher, is easier for me, because I now know what I need to focus on and what I need to clarify, versus if I just get a, "well, we didn't understand any of it," - I have no idea if that means literally nothing stuck, or if it's just not knowing what you don't know.

So by taking notes, you're able to figure out what the group really knows well, and what they need a little bit of help with. And this note-taker is the one who's going to be responsible for emailing the professor with these questions for the group. And the whole idea is, they're asking on behalf of the group, so that no one feels singled out for being confused. No one feels embarrassed.

Adam: And you can handle that email one of two ways. You can just email the professor and say, "I'm with my study group, which is John, David, Tuan and Kathy and me, and none of us understood this thing." Or you can cc: everybody, and email the professor that way.

Either way, once you get a response back from the professor, if they didn't email everybody back - and it's common for us not to hit reply all - make sure you forward it to the other people in the study group so that they get the answer too, if we said, "oh, I can answer that quickly in email" and we just shoot off an email saying, "this is where you find it and this is what it is." Boom.

Third thing is - and Dinur and I actually had a disagreement about this at first, too - but we came to the conclusion that if you're going to do the Google Doc, where everybody contributes to a Google Doc, then we would really recommend that you designate someone as your fact-checker on study guides and other things that you create as group study tools.

So at the end of the session, whoever's fact-checker that week, they need to go back through the book and through lecture notes or anything else.

Now the fact-checker, your job is not to email the teacher with 14 things you couldn't find, all right? That's not your job. But you could email the note-taker and say, you know, "I've been looking for this thing that we've got in our notes and I can't find it anywhere in the book. Could you add that to the email?" so that you're not overwhelming the teacher with email after email after email.

This way you check and see, "do we actually have a definition of anomie that more or less meets what the book says?" So this fact-checker's job is to go through the book, and to go through any lecture notes that you guys might have taken, and make sure that your study guide is actually correct - that there isn't a big glaring mistake in the middle of your Google Doc.

And the reason we recommend rotating these roles every week, as you can see, is so that no one person is always stuck fact-checking. No one person is always stuck being the monitor, saying, "hey, we need to get back on topic," so that you're not feeling resentment about having to do all the note-taking or all of the fact-checking or all of the monitoring. It's only your job once every four or five weeks, depending on how many people are in the group.

Dinur: Absolutely. So the reason Adam and I are discussing this is, I've had students try and create Google Docs without meeting in person, and often there's at least one mistake if not multiple mistakes on the Google Doc, and because no one fact checked this, everyone using the Google Doc is making the same mistakes over and over. And then I get a lot of complaints because, "but this was on the Google Doc, this is what we studied!" But just because you studied it doesn't mean it was right. The idea with the fact checker is that they are there to make sure that the information that you're using on the Google Doc is accurate. It's their job to go through

the readings. It's their job to go through the lecture notes. And they are supposed to work hand in hand with the note-taker to confirm that the information is correct.

And if it isn't, then the note-taker can email the professor and say, "we went through this. Here's where we're confused. This was in our notes, but we're not finding this. Can you please help?"

Adam: So in programming, what they call the fact-checker's job is to prevent "garbage in, garbage out." If there's garbage information in your study guide, it's going to be garbage out on the test. And that's not going to help any of you.

Now there's a ton of things that you can do during a study group and a lot of students have no idea what to do during a study group. So we're going to give you some guidelines here.

Dinur: One thing that you can always do as a group, as you can clarify and rewrite your notes. You actually go through what each of you have from lecture, talk about it and rewrite the notes. Make sure to add in material that you may have missed, because you might've gotten 80 or 90% of the lecture, and your other group members may have also gotten 80 or 90% of that lecture, but you may have missed a different 10 to 20%. And so, this is a way for you to make sure that your notes are a lot more complete.

Adam: A second thing you can do is identify your muddy points. Everyone's going to have them. Everyone's going to come to study group with at least one or two things that they just don't understand. So this is where, yeah, you have to be a little vulnerable. But you could make it a little bit more anonymous.

Maybe everybody types their muddy point on a sheet of paper and prints it, you know, they type it and they print it out before they come to study group. And then you pile those up in the middle of the table. Then, nobody knows for sure whose muddy points are whose. Maybe you find the three of you have the same muddy point. All right, so this gives you something to focus on. What is everybody still having trouble with?

And if you've got five people in the group and all of you have put your folded piece of paper with your typed muddy point on it in the middle of the table, and then you just pick somebody to go through them and they say, "Okay, well it looks like two people are having trouble with anomie, and then we've got one person who really doesn't understand Marx's view on alienation, and then we've got one person...."

So, you just go through each one and say, "Does anybody else have information on this?" What you're doing is throwing it to the group. If two of you are having trouble with the idea of anomie, and the other three didn't put it down as a muddy point, there's a very good chance that at least one of those other three people is going to be able to explain it.

And so this leads into what we'll talk about a little later: teaching each other, because once you've identified what you don't know, then you've also identified what another person can teach you. Or, what they don't know, you can now teach them.

Dinur: You can create study guides. Especially when you're in college, not every professor is willing to make a study guide. They're going to tell you something like "My class is the study guide," or, "The test covers this material. You'd better know it!"

Well, if your professor or your teacher is not giving a study guide, you can create one. Go through the previous one or two lectures, and figure out the most important information. Once you have taken a few tests, you're

going to figure out what your instructor asks, and you can try and figure out, from the material that you've gone over, what sorts of questions you might face on the test. The whole idea with this is that you're, again, engaging with the material, and that should hopefully help the materials stick with you, once test time comes around.

Adam: Now, there are also flash card games that you can play and we're going to talk about three of them here because you've probably spent some time making flash cards, but did you know you could also play games with them? Remember, any type of interacting with the material is studying. So using flashcards - that's interacting with the material.

Dinur: And flashcards usually have two sides, a question side and then answer side. And this matters in the games that Adam and I are about to discuss. So here are a few games that you can play with these flash cards.

The first one is Go Fish. Ah, the time honored game of, "David, do you have any... aces?"

Most of us know this game from when we were little kids. Deal out seven cards from the deck to each player, and then try to guess who has the other queen, eight, or five cards in their hands. For each match you make with the card in your hand, you get two points: one per card.

Here's a variation to help you interact more with material. Each person keeps their own flash cards as a deck to draw from. Because flashcards have information on both sides, you'll need to put up folded pieces of paper to screen your cards from the other players. Just take a piece of notebook paper, fold in half short ways from the bottom to the top, so that the shorter sides line up and the longer sides get folded, and then you stand it in front of you, to hide your cards.

When it's your turn, don't ask a single person for their cards. Instead, ask the group for a card by - ask for it by the question on the card you're holding, not the answer. For example, "does anyone have the definition of anomie?"

"Does anyone have Marx's definition of alienation?"

"Does anyone have the dates of the battle of Bunker Hill?"

Or, "the quadratic equation?"

Everyone who figures out which card you mean puts theirs on the table in front of this screen, answer side down.

After about five or ten seconds - use a timer to be fair - announce the answer you're looking for.

Anyone who figured out what the answer is before you announce it gets to keep their card and puts it in their points pile. The ones who didn't figure it out fast enough have to give their card to you, if they have it in their hands. The person with the highest score, or whoever reaches a preset score first, wins the game.

And a good rule of thumb: start with the number of people playing and add one card for the winning preset score. So if there are three people playing, four cards is a win. If there are five people playing, six cards is a win.

Adam: Now, the second game you can play with flash cards is Flash Cards Against Humanity. Now, Cards Against Humanity, and its more tame version, Apples to Apples, have two kinds of cards. There's a judge's card, and then there's the game cards.

So, players start with a hand of five game cards, and the judge then puts down a judge's card with a question that players must "match" the game cards to.

Now in the original games, the judge gets to decide what the best match is, and the judge card is awarded to the player who wins. After a certain number of judge cards won, the player with that number wins the game.

So in this variation on the game, the game cards and the judge cards all come from the same deck. It's all your group's pile of flash cards. I do recommend that if you're going to do a study group, establish it at the beginning of the semester and say, okay, "John gets to create blue cards" and "Jamie gets to create green cards" and "Emmy gets to use white cards", so that, at the end, it's easy to sort out who's cards are whose.

So combine all of your flash cards together to make a deck and shuffled them question side down. Then set the number of judge cards you have to win in order to win the game, and deal five cards to each player. After a card is placed on the board, it gets discarded and players will draw a card to replace it.

So the judge places a card, question side up, on the table - and then they say what the goal of this match is: "Make people laugh" or "give me the serious match" or "be sarcastic" or "give the worst match you can give" - and the judge can also come up with other possibilities beyond these; I mean, these are just suggestions - and then, after the judge puts down their judge card, they have to turn away or close their eyes so they don't know who played which card.

Each player then plays a card, answer side up, on the judge's card. And then, after the judge decides the winner of the match (who keeps the judge card), you're going to discard all the cards that were played on the judge card. Then, everyone has to say something about how that particular match made them look at the topics of both of the cards in a new way. Judgeship then passes to the left, and you play another round.

Dinur: Another game you can play is Three Random Categories. And in this game, you're not playing against each other, but it does give you a way to talk about and explain things in a new way. Choose a set of three categories - for example: "outdoors," "indoors," and "both," and each person sorts their flash cards into those three categories. Then, talk about why you did it will give you a new way to interact with the material as well as get other people's perspectives on why they might have sorted that card differently from you.

Adam: And one way to do Three Random Categories, for example, is: let's pretend that you are working on your American History class and you're studying for the Revolutionary War. So you have to sort these cards into "indoors," "outdoors," and "both."

All right, well, where's the Declaration of Independence probably going to be? Well, it makes sense that you're going to put it "indoors." It was written there, it was read there, the people gathered to talk about it there. This is something that was mainly done as an indoor thing.

Outdoors, on the other hand? Maybe the Battle of Yorktown. it was a battle. It happened outdoors. So this is going to go in the "outdoors" category.

And then George Washington, he's "both," right? 'Cause he was indoors and outdoors - he was everywhere.

Another set of categories that you could use would be "hot," "cold," and "both" - or "hot," "cold" and "neither." And you might sort someone who was known to have a hot temper into "hot," someone who was known to be very grave and decisive into "cold," someone who was known to change with the situation into "neither" or "both." Notice how this gives you a new way to look at these events and these people.

Dinur: And what we're hoping that you're seeing from this, is that you're talking about the same material that you need to know for your test or for a paper, but you're thinking about it differently. You're hopefully thinking about it in a more relaxed atmosphere, and that hopefully helps you engage with the material.

Adam: When you have different ways to look at these folks, you often make connections you would never have made otherwise. And if you're studying for a paper or a, or a test that has an essay exam, that can be critical to increasing your grade.

Dinur: Now, think about this in a weird way as being a little bit like art. When a person wants to sculpt something out of clay, it starts as clay. It doesn't start as a finished product. But they manipulate that clay. They shape it, they mold it, they work with it in different ways until they get the product or the finished result that they want. In this case, the material from your class is your clay. It's up to you to work with that material and manipulate it so that it makes sense for you and so that it's usable.

Adam: You can find an article on my website at undergradeasier.com that essentially gives all of this, again, in a written format. So if you go to undergradeasier.com/5-ways-to-make-a-study-group-work-for-you - and there's a dash between each of those and the five is a number - then you can look in more detail at how we do these three flash card games.

Dinur: And one thing you can do is quiz each other. I mentioned earlier that, especially after the first test or first quiz, you have a good idea of what your teacher is looking for. You'll know if they're looking for a lot of multiple choice, true false, essay questions, matching - and you can tailor your study group to mimic those questions. You go through it because that way you've gone through a test of sorts without losing anything if you get a question wrong, you've gone over it in a more relaxed atmosphere, and hopefully by the time the test rolls around, you'll be relaxed when have to face the same material.

Adam: Another way is to teach each other. Now remember, we talked about identifying muddy points? Well, this is the point where you say, "all right, so we have a muddy point on the table and it's about anomie. Anybody want to take a stab at this?" or "We've got a muddy point here. If someone says that they keep forgetting the important dates in the battle of Yorktown, can someone help us out here?"

And this is where you just talk through the material together and where you say, "all right, I still don't understand this." And when you talk through the material together, that's not the only thing you could be doing. I mean, you could talk about "here's what we learned" or "here's what we need to know" or "did we make sure that this got onto the study guide" or whatever. But you can also share study strategies.

Dinur: and you can think about this as your way of mentoring one of your classmates. It's a way of developing and fostering a good relationship, because you're helping one another. You're helping each other succeed. And ultimately doing well in a class is not a zero-sum game. It's not one person gets an A and that means no one else can. Why not help each other do and be the best that you can possibly be?

Adam: And when you teach each other and share study strategies, you're also going over the material. Again, remember, interacting with the material is studying. We keep on hammering on that, because it is something that so many students, when I tell them that, they look at me like "what? I thought studying was just reading and rereading!"

It's a lot more than that.

So teachers, let's talk about how you can use this. First we mentioned giving credit for study groups. It is so important that, if you want your students to do things outside of class time, that you give them credit for it. It could just be a check mark, you know, that you have to do four study groups in the course of the semester. All right? And as you get them done, that's great.

Or, you could require a study group to produce a report on what they did. This is where that note-taker comes in again, right?

And you can talk about, in class, the different things you can do in study groups. So you could just take this podcast, make some notes from it, or even just tell them "go listen to this podcast. Go listen to episode 25 of Learning Made Easier and learn how to do things in study groups."

You can also ask the class for what they do in study groups. There may be plenty of other strategies that we have not covered here. I don't claim to be completely omniscient about everything! So you may get some really good ideas from your students who say, "well, when I'm in a study group, if I do this, then I learn more." Hey, put that on the list and then teach it to your students.

Students, the way you can use this is to, first of all, make study groups a regular part of your study practice, not something optional, not something every now and then. This is part of your studying. Basically, your study time is the study group. Learning in groups creates a situation where you might not remember what that definition was from the book, but you'll remember how it sounded when your friend Karen said it. Or you may not remember how to do that equation from the book, but you'll remember watching your friend John walk you through it.

So if you can create more ways, more study senses, that you can remember these things with - a study group is a wonderful place to create additional study senses, 'cause you can hear other people's voices telling you, you can watch other people's hands writing it and look at what they're doing, and this creates more memories that you can draw on.

Dinur: And a big part of that was the word "regular." Regular means consistent. And that's what Adam and I mean when we said earlier, make sure that you find a day and time that works for your group to meet. Because you want to have that built into your routine, so that it's just part of what you do, rather than being an additional obligation and something that you dread. If it's routine, it's no big deal.

Adam: Right. If you study three times a week, let's say, then make one of those three times a week, "that's when I go to study group." Then it's not something that's onerous or an additional burden. It's just, okay. My study time on Fridays is when I go to the local grind, and I sit there, and we have a cup of coffee, and we study together.

Dinur: And I mentioned earlier about studying in social locations, coffee shops or diners - and Adam said you also want to make sure that the group stays on track in these locations. You want to have time to chit-chat a

little bit. Because look, we're people, we like to talk about stuff other than just work - and schoolwork is work. So build that time in. Accept that you're not going to be on topic 100% of the time, but you should be on topic at least 75% of the time if not higher. You want to have the focus of the group be on work.

And again, if you're meeting in a social location - in a coffee shop, in a diner - you want to make sure it's a place where you can hear each other easily, where you don't have to scream to be heard. You don't want to go to a coffee shop during its open mic night because you're going to be competing with people who think they can sing it and can't, or think they are comedians and are terrible. You - either way, you're not going to be able to hear what you need to hear.

Adam: It sounds like you're speaking from personal experience on that last one, Dinur.

Dinur: Oh yeah.

That's what Adam and I have for you for Episode 25. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends. We're always to get new subscribers so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you could write us a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 26, when we'll talk about how to take your time to do work right, even if you're feeling pressured, rushed, or stressed.

Dinur: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier: a podcast about how we learn, how we teach and how they overlap.

Adam: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

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Adam: And we look forward to seeing you next week.