



Starting and managing a study group

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) at Western

PASS is like a super study group, facilitated by a senior student who has completed the unit. In the weekly sessions, you will quickly build your learning strategies, develop your content knowledge, and improve your problem solving skills. The sessions are also a great opportunity to build a network of like-minded friends and collaborators.

Research assessing the effectiveness and impact of PASS has shown that students who regularly attended PASS:

- Scored significantly higher grades
- Improved their understanding of subject content
- Felt better prepared for exams or final essays
- Enjoyed the learning experience
- Learned how to better work collaboratively and productively

At Western Sydney University, you can attend **PASS on-campus** or online (**PASSOnline**).

DIY (Do-It-Yourself) study group

If PASS is not offered for your unit(s), or if you are unable to attend on campus or online, you can create your own study group. Humans are social beings, and learning and teaching is a social experience. Learning with, and from, each other in small groups gives you the opportunity to creatively and collaboratively determine the meaning, importance and applicability of knowledge and concepts in your discipline without the authority of a designated expert or teacher.

There are a number of factors, however, that you must consider to maintain group cohesion and to prevent a productive, focused, and truly collaborative environment from turning into chaos. Below are some guiding points.

Agenda

Organisation is the key. After co-ordinating schedules to select a regular day and time, you need a space, e.g. an indoor or outdoor study space on campus, at a host's house, or a public space. The details of the session schedule should ideally be drafted together, in advance, with any preparation work clearly identified and explicitly allocated. Some study groups decide to set a rotating study session leader role. In this 'round robin' situation, the designated leader is in charge of setting the agenda and preparation tasks, and notifying all members the week before. Then, on study group day, the leader initiates each item on the agenda to keep the session on time.

An agenda doesn't have to be a precise plan, just a directional sign structured around specific targets or topics, and where possible some goals or outcomes or measures that help you work out when

you've adequately addressed an issue. Clarifying your collective aims in advance will help you to stay on task.

Example

Time	Issue/Topic/Target	Goal/Outcome/Measure
11am	This week's lecture Notes exchange/discussion Big questions/concepts	One-sentence summary/group mind-map Top 3 questions
11:15am-	This week's upcoming tutorial	Definition of jargon/difficult terminology
11:45am	Readings discussion Interpreting the theory How it expands on the lecture content How it might appear as an exam question	Theory explained in simple terms Example exam question
11:45am-	Assignment 1	Assignment topics announced
12:15pm	Choose essay topic Discuss research approach* Share reference management strategies and tools	Share a concept map of similar steps in research approach Exchange links/instructions on ref management tools
12:15pm	Summary / Minute paper Prep/Brainstorm for next study session	3 things learned, 3 questions remaining, 3 actions to take Session leader nominated, set agenda outline, agreed next session date/time

In the beginning, it might be difficult to get all group members to think of what they want to address. These prompts might help you to assist them figure out their needs:

- The main question I want to answer is...
- A question I have is...
- X says Y. B interprets it as C. Is that really what X meant?
 - I got confused when...
 - I'm not sure of...
 - I agree / disagree with X because...
- I think that X voices are being left out because...

Group dynamics

There are a few things you can establish from the outset to ensure that your study group lasts and works well by promoting connection, open communication, and equality.

The most fun and, frankly, the easiest task to include is a two- to five-minute ice breaker or energiser game at the beginning of each study session. It helps to set the foundation for working together, enjoying the company of others, and the all-important bonding and connecting with each other beyond the subject matter. This can (and should!) be done every week. Again, you can allocate this task to the session leader or have an Energizer Game Leader designated and responsible for this task. There are loads of ideas out there – Google is only a click away. Just be mindful of the space you are in, the time you have, and the familiarity of the group with each other. Here are a few low-budget, easy-to-run group favourites:

Energiser	Description
The Name Game	Each participant states their name and either the etymology (meaning) of their name and/or the story of how they came to be named.
Treasure Island	Each participant identifies the three items they would take with them on a deserted island and why.
Human Knot	In a circle, participants put their arms in the centre and find someone else's hand to hold. Once all hands have been joined, as a group, participants work together to unravel the knot without letting go of hands.
Fear in a Hat	Each participant anonymously writes down a personal fear on a piece of paper. The paper is folded up and put into a hat or container. Each participant then draws out a piece of paper, reads out the fear written on it, and explains how the person might feel.
Incommunicado	Each participant remains silent (no vocal sounds). A facilitator calls out random features (e.g. height) or abilities (e.g. number of push-ups you can do), etc. The participants, without speaking to each other, must arrange themselves in a line in order (e.g. from tallest to shortest; from the least to the most number of push-ups).
Whose Line Is It Anyway?	Participants take turns being the 'actor'. The designated actor performs a line from a television show or movie, and all other participants have to guess the name of the television show or movie.

Once commonalities are shared and rapport starts to build, you can begin to address preferred modes of communication amongst the group. Will all correspondence be via Western student email? Will you use Office 365 to collaboratively compose, edit, and share the agenda and other resources? Will you use Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp to notify the group if you're feeling sick a few days before or running late on the day?

It's also a good way to segue into roles and responsibilities and reach an understanding on what equality looks like in your study group. What is the back-up plan if the session leader is away? Does everyone agree to organise a session and run it in a 'round robin'? Or does everyone prefer to make a small contribution each week? What strategies do you all prefer to use so that everyone contributes vocally each week, that no one dominates, and that no one feels like they can't voice their ideas? It's important to remember that you don't have to have everything figured out from the start, but as long as you set the tone for equal contribution it'll make it easier to work towards equitable learning out loud through dialogue and debate.

Doing the learning

When you think of a study group, what do you think of? A small group of students seated at a round table in a private study room? That's really just one option. Don't let the idea of traditional study groups limit your creativity. You'll find a few ideas in [Maximise your productivity](#) (PDF, 270 kB), like a walking and talking study group session with the aid of, for example, flash cards.

Learning exchange can extend beyond discussion. You can make your study activities more dynamic and fun by allowing group members to create activities, games, treasure hunts, scenarios, etc. to explore your discipline content in a different, and often more active, way. It's ok to play when learning. Play occurs in safe spaces where you experiment, make mistakes, learn, retry, and challenge yourself and others. By thinking and acting outside of your comfort zone you follow curiosity to surprising discoveries. What can you do to use play in activities to immerse yourself and learn?

Examples

Activity	Description
Peripatetic	Walking, talking, discussing a single topic, for example a student study group at University of Alaska Southeast (video, 1:00).
PeerWise	An online study group option. Start a group, individuals create Q&As on topics for peers to practice and discuss.
Think Visually	<p>Think differently!</p> <p>Instead of creating a timeline to study the progression of a historical battle or development, why not use a blank geographical map of the areas involved and use a free drawing approach to connect the information and issues – and most importantly, what you don't know!</p> <p>Example via The Junto for American historians.</p> <p>Instead of writing an outline of a topic or your essay argument, why not give everyone a piece of A4 paper, a marker pen, and two minutes to sketch their ideas. Then give everyone two minutes to explain their creation. These visual thinking basics 'how to' videos will help.</p>
Gamify	Instead of cramming notes into your head for the exam, can you create trivia-style questions?

Inspiration

If you ever doubt the capacity of students to make incredible contributions to their own learning and those of their peers, then take a look at the students who participated in the '[computer in the wall' experiments](#) (video, 17:25) all over the world. As a team, without traditional educational resources and support, these children were able to learn by observing each other, discussing ideas and approaches, and collaboratively problem solving.