

Managing Group Tutoring Sessions

Because of the high demand for tutoring services at the University Center for Learning Assistance, you will be tutoring groups of up to five students in the same course. The following information is provided to help you understand the purpose and procedures for working with groups.

Individual tutoring has many natural benefits, while group tutoring requires a more conscious leadership role on the part of the tutor. The primary advantage of group tutoring (and disadvantage of individual tutoring) is the potential for the sharing of a variety of views and information. Groups also demonstrate cooperative attitudes and work skills in contrast to individual tutoring, which is more self-centered by nature. We are trying to establish the characteristics of positive interdependence, individual accountability, shared leadership, and interpersonal and small group skills, with an emphasis on task and group processing.

The Purpose of Study Groups

Many undergraduates, and in some instances graduate students, fail to realize the potential of a study group in relation to learning and mastery of course materials. Students enrolled in doctoral studies, law, and medical programs have taken advantage of study groups as a learning technique for many years. Study groups typically involve students who meet weekly, and sometimes more often, to share information, knowledge, and expertise about a course in which they are all enrolled. The study group environment offers students an opportunity to engage in intense dialogue about course material. Effective study groups assist students in the application and synthesis of course material. Groups that are effective generate energy, active participation, discipline, and commitment from group members. These dynamics are all important criteria for learning.

Study groups offer students the opportunity for in-depth discussions about course material. They provide an opportunity for students to think out loud and share insights about their knowledge. The time for students to find out what they do not know is before a test or examination, not during it!

Ground Rules for Group Meetings

Members should bring notes, laboratory materials, problems sets, and textbooks to each group meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to share information and to make meaning of the course material (more below). These points are extremely important. In effective study groups all members should attempt to enhance their knowledge and application of course material and strive to be supportive and encouraging of others in the group. Study groups will not work if they are perceived as a hostile, judgmental, or intimidating experience.

Procedures for Making Meaning of the Course Material

1. Have the students compare all members' class notes for each lecture presented since the last study group meeting. Make sure that all members agree on the basic content of the lecture notes, their importance, and their meaning. If there are discrepancies in members' notes, consult the textbook or suggest that they ask the professor for clarification. Help the group discriminate important, essential information from supportive information that was shared by the professor to embellish or illustrate points made in class.
2. Help the students learn the material at two distinct levels. First, make sure students know the material by having them drill one another with questions about its literal or rote meaning. This is the easy part – rote learning. It is helpful at this stage to ask students to attempt to state notes or text material in their own words. The ability to paraphrase has a strong, positive association with memory and learning.
3. A critical aspect of the group proceeding is making meaning of the literal, rote learning. Help this process by using several techniques such as (a) have students ask one another questions that focus on the application of the material being learned, (b) ask students "compare and contrast" questions, (c) discuss why the information is useful, and (d) discuss how the material is applied in a broader context. For example, how do several aspects or areas of the lecture and textbook readings come together to make greater, holistic sense? Also discuss the significance of materials learned earlier in the course to the areas being discussed in later class lectures and readings.
4. Students engaged in study group discussions sometimes become intimidated. Encourage students to take risks, be creative, and think out loud. In this way, each group member can listen to how the others attempt to make meaning of the course material.
5. "Brainstorm" possible test questions that require application of the material being learned. Get each group member involved by asking them to bring several possible questions to each meeting.

Note: These procedures pertain to groups that meet on a weekly basis, not a one-session experience before the test. It is too late at that point to gain much from this type of experience. Therefore, you should explain to your group the importance of attending the sessions weekly. It is of much greater benefit to them to attend regularly instead of attending only before the tests.

Guidelines for Tutoring Groups

The following are some basic group tutoring guidelines which enhance group learning. Remember that these guidelines (and skills) require conscious leadership on the tutor's part.

1. **Why are You Here?** Keep in mind that, as a tutor, you are a resource for students and their learning. Your role is to facilitate their learning process, not to work problems for them. Have students explain answers, concepts, and definitions to you and to each other. To check for understanding, ask another student to describe the same concept in his or her own words. Keep the students totally involved. **The students should be the ones writing on the board!**
2. **Have a Seat:** Sit where all can see and hear you and the other group members. Arrange seating so it encourages interaction among the group members and visibility. Some version of a circle usually works well. If you're using a board, be sure everyone can see it. If there is a quieter part of the room, go there.
3. **Silence is Golden:** Waiting for students to volunteer a well-developed answer allows high-level thinking to take place. If you are uncomfortable waiting for 30 seconds, join students in looking through notes or text. **If students are unable to answer the question, refer the students to the source of information, rather than explaining it to them.**
4. **Remember Socrates:** Use probing questions. Ask open-ended questions, and rephrase questions if they do not yield comments.
5. **Talk, Talk, Talk:** Don't allow individuals to dominate the discussion. Try to involve everyone in the learning activity; non-participants must be drawn into the activity. Make sure everyone in the group gets a chance to participate. Control vocal students by ceding the floor to others. For example: "Let's not let Shawn do all the work. Mary, what do you think we should do to start this problem?" Or "Why don't we go around the group and hear from everyone on this." Provide opportunities for quiet students to participate. For example: "We haven't heard from you in a while, Ralph. What do you think of Emerald's answer?" Ask each student to respond to "What was the most difficult part of this lesson?" and "What was the most exciting /interesting part of this lesson?" **Remember it is the students who should be doing more than 50% of the talking, not the tutor!**
6. **Atmosphere:** The students should feel comfortable offering their answers. Tutors should provide a non-threatening environment for practicing. Respect and react positively to all questions or responses offered by students, no matter how basic. Praise attempts, even if the answer is incorrect. Don't allow personal attacks from one group member to another. Facilitate resolution if there are interpersonal conflicts. For example: "It seems like we have a disagreement. What suggestions do you have for resolving it?" Feel free to include humor in the session. Keep the session on topic and moving at the appropriate pace for the group's abilities.
7. **The End:** Ask the students what they learned during the session, what they still need clarification on, or what they would like to cover in the next session. Summarize the contributions of all students and integrate them into a whole. This reinforces learning and helps all to see their contribution and feel included. For example: "Great! It looks like we've got it. Shawn said that mitosis is when a cell replicates itself by dividing in two. After xeroxing its DNA, as Emerald called it. And Ralph added that in meiosis, there's one xeroxing that's followed by two divisions, which is how you get a haploid cell." You might also ask them to come to the next session with a few predictions of test questions.

Increasing Motivation

Engaging students in the learning process is often a challenging part of tutoring. Here are some suggestions to help you to help the students succeed.

1. **Structure and Expectations:** Try to establish a routine for starting and ending a tutoring session. Also, discuss what expectations you have of the tutees and what expectations they have of you. (If their expectations of you are inappropriate, make it clear right away what our policies allow.) Hold students to high academic standards. The students will feel the accomplishment when those standards are met.
2. **Environment:** Choose or create an environment with as few distractions as possible. For example, if there are already three groups in the middle room and none in the back room, take your group to the quieter area.
3. **Preparation:** Be prepared with a variety of activities to do with the group. Share your plan with your tutees ("Today, we are going to . . ."). Tailor your activities to your tutees' learning styles. Use parts of your sessions to discuss strategies for learning the subject, strategies for adapting individual learning styles to the subject, and strategies for adapting to an instructor's teaching style.
4. **Relevance and Interest:** Design activities that appeal to the tutees' interests or have real - world applications whenever possible. Include relating material to college life, future goals, careers, etc. Help students create a link to previous material. Include as much variety as possible. Visual aids are generally helpful.
5. **Discuss Barriers:** Ask the students about what they perceive as barriers to motivation and learning of this subject material. Discuss strategies for reducing these barriers. Emphasize and encourage intrinsic motivations and rewards. Be sure that you model appropriate interest and pleasure in learning.
6. **Choice and Control:** Let students help decide what will be addressed in the session. Have them anticipate exam questions and create their own study guides. Ask each student if he/she is clear on what has been discussed so far, and ask if the techniques you are using are helping them learn.
7. **Solicit Input:** Ask periodically if the tutees have suggestions for improvement of the sessions. Discuss what can or cannot be changed. If a tutee feels frustrated with the tutoring sessions, discuss why. Allow your tutees to teach you something - e.g., about their culture, their home country, their interests, etc.
8. **Peer Support:** Make use of peer support by asking members to offer support and feedback for other members. Value and give credit to contributions. Let the students lead the discussion whenever possible.
9. **Celebrate:** Praise learners often. Focus your praise on the tutee's work or effort, rather than his or her ability. Let your tutees know when you are pleased with their performance during a tutoring session – e.g., good questions asked, participation, prepared for session, etc. As much as you can, point out concrete improvements that the tutee has made - e.g., better test scores, less test anxiety, more homework completed, etc.
10. **Follow through:** If you need to look something up and get back to the student later, be sure to do so as soon as possible.

Difficult Group Members

Even though you will be working hard to make sure the group climate is cooperative, every now and then a group member may develop behavior patterns that interfere with the learning environment of the rest of the group. Some suggestions follow.

- Don't tolerate disruptive behavior to uphold the illusion of harmony.
- Refuse to be goaded into a reciprocal pattern. Don't counter abusive remarks with abusive remarks.
- To keep yourself from becoming angry, remove yourself mentally from the conflict – listen as if you were an uninvolved third party.
- Don't provide a soapbox for the troublemaker.
- Attempt to convert a disruption into a constructive contribution.
- Confront the person directly. Reserve the last 5 to 10 minutes of the session to review the behavior issue individually (and privately) with the tutee. Be as specific as you can. Discuss your expectations with the tutee and how you can work on this problem together.
- Remind the tutee that tutoring time is limited and valuable. Explain to the tutee that wasting time is a problem because it is unfair to other students who'd like to work with you.
- If the issue escalates into something you cannot handle (or do not feel comfortable with), ask for assistance from one of the UCLA grad assistants or the Coordinator. If all else fails, the disruptive student will be removed from the group.
- Be sure to mention the behavior issue to your grad supervisor or the Coordinator. Also keep detailed notes with your Tutor Session Records.

What Would You Do??

Use the following to practice your responses to difficult student situations.

✓ **Know-It-All Ness**

There are five students in your group. In the past, your sessions have been relaxed and interactive. Today, however, Know-It-All Ness is “performing” in your group. While Ness dominates the session, the rest of the group quickly loses interest. What do you do? (Taping her mouth shut is not an option!)

✓ **Intolerant Iggy**

There are three students attending your session. One student is having difficulty grasping the material and still shows confusion about a concept that you and the group have just discussed. Another student is clearly irritated with the slower group member and reminds you that “time is fleeting”. What do you do?

✓ **The Distracting Duo**

Your session has five students. Three are listening and participating, but two of the students are only talking between themselves. As the session continues, the two repeatedly burst into gales of laughter, thereby disrupting the rest of the group. What do you do? (Throwing something at a student isn't really allowed!)

✓ **Negative Norman**

Your sessions always seem to run smoothly, except for the times when Negative Norman attends. Norman not only has a negative attitude about the course, but also about the professor. Norman continuously turns the session into a gripe session and gets the other students to rally against the professor. What will you do to get Negative Norman back on track?

✓ **Off-Task Trouble**

You have asked the students in your group to divide up and work separately on some problems. The students are interacting well with one another. Unfortunately, one group is talking about recent NCAA issues and the other is talking about what they're planning to do this weekend. You're losing control of the subject at hand. What do you do to refocus their efforts on the session? (Even though you would like to know what's going on this weekend.)

✓ **Filing Felecia**

You are fifteen minutes into your session and notice that Felecia has been filing her nails throughout the entire time. She doesn't seem to be paying attention, and now other group members are watching her file. What do you do? (Pulling her nails off with pliers is not an option!)

✓ **Date Dilemma**

One of your (very attractive) group members hangs around after a session to ask you if you'd like to go to the movies. What do you say?

✓ **Dissatisfied Denise**

On a particular session, you have asked students to work together to solve some problems that they will then present to the rest of the group. Denise tells you she expects you to explain the material to the group, and not for the group to explain the material to each other. What do you do?

✓ **Arguing Arnie**

During a session, two students start arguing with each other about what to do during the session. One is saying things like, “If you would pay attention in class, you would know the answer to that.” What do you do?