

Designing Teacher Study Groups
A Guide for Success

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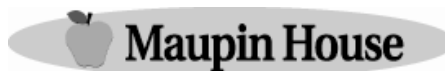
A Guide for Success

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1 What Are Teacher Study Groups?

“The professional study groups that we started at Edison serve to guide the teachers into doing more research that pertains to their subject areas. They also serve to teach the teachers the ‘why’ behind some of the requirements we place on them.”

Dottie Uribe

Campus Instructional Coordinator

Before we begin this discussion, perhaps we should take a quick pre-test to assess your background knowledge.

What is a study group?

- a) A gaggle of stressed out gabby girls and guys who meet to eat, drink, and be merry?
- b) A mandated provision of education code 361.198765490 199?
- c) A group of people who meet regularly to exchange ideas and knowledge about texts and/or other resources they are reading?



If your answer was “C,” congratulations! You are right! Carlene Murphy, Director of Staff Development at Richmond County Public Schools, defines a study group as “a small number of individuals joining together to increase their capacities through new learning for the benefit of students.” To elaborate further, study groups are quickly becoming a dynamic way for teachers to grow through teacher-created professional development.

As a member of a study group, an individual can seek and suggest clarification and interpretation of text or ideas, reinforce his or her own learning, receive encouragement, and develop a sense of belonging to a community of learners—facets of learning often missing when a person studies alone. Collaborating with other professionals is especially important for teachers and is a significant benefit of study groups. Study groups offer participants not mandated workshops, but rather the luxury of *choice* in terms of studying what interests the group.

Types of Study Groups

Study groups come in all shapes and sizes. A fancy definition would tell you that the word “study” suggests the activities of the group will include presentations and discussions of important new trends and developments in research or practice related to the topic under consideration. In other words, “anything goes.” Study groups can serve many purposes. All center on the study of professional material. To meet your own group’s specific needs, we suggest integrating useful aspects from a variety of study group models. The following is a list of our favorites.



Topic Study Groups (The Private Eye Method)

If a good mystery keeps you hanging on the edge of your seat, this is the group for you. Break out the magnifying glass, deerstalker hat, overcoat, pipe, and don a big moustache...uh, well, O.K. All you'll really need is a group of enthusiastic teachers, a room to gather in, notebooks, pens, highlighters, and some titillating texts. In a Topic Study Group, the members choose an area of focus based on their own needs assessment and then research available information on the topic. A staff member can suggest several choices of texts, articles, or video series for the group to investigate, and then solicit interested participants to choose which are most appealing. The group may then review and select from these materials.

In *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*, Richard Allington (2001) refers to this type of study group as a TAPER (Teachers as Professional Education Readers) study group. The goal of a TAPER Study Group "...is to develop individual expertness and foster the development of shared knowledge among members of the group" (p.113). Each time the study group reconvenes, group members share their insights, seek clarification on ideas from the text, and make connections between the readings and their classrooms.

Our study group (see Introduction) was a Topic Study Group. We selected the book we wanted to read based on interest and need. We read through the book over a three-month time period, meeting every two weeks to share and discuss insights and knowledge gained.



Now, since the book we happened to be studying had lots of ideas on how to teach writing, some in the group took the initiative and tried out these ideas in their classes. This is not part of a Topic Study Group, but who's going to stop the creative juices from flowing? With that in mind, if you are seeking more "hands on" participation, more "show and tell," and a chance to hone your teaching skills, then the next type of group would be just right for you.

Practices Study Group (The Dr. Phil Study Group)

If you are into self improvement and New Age introspection, you would probably "dig" the Practices Study Group. Dr. Phil's often-asked question, "How's that working for you?" would certainly be helpful as teachers reflect in an introspective manner about their own teaching and how to improve it.

The Practices Study Group is designed to be a metacognitive learning tool. Members focus on a strategy that they learn and experiment with through active participation. Components of a Practices Study Group might include teachers watching videotapes of themselves or others teaching, observing in other classrooms, or discussion within the group about ways to improve lesson presentation, classroom management, instructional implementation, questioning practices, student learning styles, or pacing and movement through the lesson cycle.

Practices Study Groups might also involve the study of professional books, articles, or videotapes (as in a Topic



Study Group), but with the added expectation of “home-work.” In other words, between scheduled meetings teachers will try out the lesson ideas, strategies, or concepts in their own classrooms. When the group reconvenes they can do several things:

- Share how the lesson and/or strategy they tried worked.
- Bring in work samples and/or products from the lesson for “show and tell.”
- Share a videotape of themselves teaching the lesson or using the strategy in order to debrief and solicit feedback.
- Give a “mini teach” to the rest of the group on some aspect of the study group readings.

Alison Bapst, an educator in Sarasota, Florida, has conducted several successful Practices Study Groups with teachers across grade levels as well as within the same grade level at her school. One such group used Marcia Freeman’s K-5 school-wide video series. Part of the meeting time was devoted to viewing and discussing the videos. As the facilitator, Ms. Bapst supplied examples of student work and relevant children’s literature, as well as writing chart tablets that complemented the assigned reading for that week. During study group meetings, she would model a lesson from the reading to give teachers an idea of how the lessons would evolve. Group members also presented lessons they had tried and examples of resulting student work.

