

IRP COORDINATOR HANDBOOK

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I. INTRODUCTION: PEER LEARNING

Peer learning, the fundamental principle of the IRP, creates an environment that is different from the traditional classroom. In peer learning, the coordinators are not necessarily experts in the subject of the study group. Rather, they are following a particular interest, gaining expertise while preparing the study group, and engaging together with the group in exploring the subject. Coordinators define the topics and the resource materials and develop strategies for active and creative engagement by and with participants.

Participants, in turn, prepare for study group sessions by reading, viewing or listening to the assigned materials so that they can engage with peers, including the coordinator, in interactive learning. Study group members become learning resources themselves. They might also be encouraged to give presentations or reports, present information about relevant public events such as lectures and museum exhibits, or let the coordinator know about interesting articles or web links that may be of interest to participants.

These peer learning concepts are applied by the Curriculum Committee when it considers study group proposals. Considerations include whether: (i) the subject matter, including texts and other written materials, is appropriately challenging, (ii) study group content is clearly described, and (iii) participants will have a clear understanding of their role as active participants in the learning process.

Again, a peer learning study group is not a conventional lecture class (although there may be a lecture component). Instead, having already studied the subject in depth, you will encourage the development of ideas through discussion.

II. OPERATIONAL MATTERS

A. Before the First Session

To assure the smooth running of your study group, these “housekeeping” activities should be done before the first session at the beginning of the semester.

(1) Study Group Materials:

Reading materials for your study group may be provided through:

- one or more books,
- a printed course pack that participants purchase,
- attachments and links in emails which you send to participants, and/or
- a website (*e.g.*, Google Sites) that you have set up with week by week assignments and materials.

The materials that participants will need to prepare for the first session should be available several weeks in advance.

If you are printing a course pack, take into account the printer's lead time so that the book will be ready for participants to pick up in mid to late August. Coordinators who have used printed course packs have found Advanced Copy Center, 552 LaGuardia Place to be a good choice, based on price and customer service.

Similarly, if you are using email or a website, set up the site and and/or organize any mail links and attachments well in advance.

Most coordinators who have used a website have used Google Sites.¹ Technical assistance for doing this will be available, either through an IRP program or through your Curriculum Committee contact or another member of the Curriculum Committee.

(2) Group Email List:

Once you have received your study group roster, create a group email list. This will make it easier for you to communicate with your study participants. Member email addresses can be found in the Zine membership list and may also be included in your roster. One common procedure is to copy each email address and paste into a Word (or other word processing program) document and then, as needed, copy and paste the list into the email address bar. You may also be able to use your email program's group feature if one is included in that program.

(3) Welcome Email:

Send a welcome email to your participants, preferably a few weeks before the first session.

- Ask recipients to reply to the email, confirming that you have their correct email address; follow up with any participants who do not reply.
- Use the photos on the Zine directory to help you learn the names of your study group members.
- Send out an updated syllabus, if necessary.
- Remind participants of the study group time and location. As rooms are usually assigned just before the beginning of the semester, you may need a follow up email.
- Provide details on where to buy the course pack, if any.
- Remind participants if you want them to bring materials to the classroom.
- Ask participants to let you know if they have trouble accessing online materials.
- Give the assignment for the first session. Use this opportunity to remind participants of the particular editions of books that you plan to use. Include links to online materials and your website if you have set one up.
- Remind participants to let you know about any planned absences.

¹ The New School has a communications feature called CANVAS, but it is not currently available to coordinators because of limitations in the New School's license of the technology.

(4) Check Out the AV Equipment:

Nothing can be more frustrating to the coordinator and the study group participants than difficulties in running the visual materials you plan to use. Check out the classroom equipment in advance: run your Power Point slides, access your internet links, play your DVD. (See Audio/Visual under General Information, below.)

B. Study Group Sessions

(1) Participants:

Attendance: Be sure to take attendance in each session. The IRP office will send an attendance sheet to everyone coordinating a study group at SPS via email, including a link to an IRP attendance website; after each session, go to this site and transfer that week's attendance information. Study groups meeting at The New School will report attendance on the attendance sheet in the file that coordinators pick up in and return to the office. Most coordinators find that taking attendance themselves aids in learning participant names; however, you can also see if one of the participants in your study group wants to help by doing the attendance.

Learning Names: Do all that you can to help yourself and your participants to learn each other's names.

- Call the roll and have participants answer out loud and raise their hands, particularly in the first few sessions.
- Some coordinators ask members to introduce themselves for at least the first half dozen sessions.
- Try to call on people by name as much as you can.
- Names on "tent cards" may be helpful, especially in smaller study groups.
- You can see member pictures in the Zine, which may be helpful for linking names and faces.

Introduce new IRP members: At the first session, identify and introduce new members so they will feel welcome in the community. Encourage members to welcome new members by inviting them for coffee or lunch. The study group plays a major role in building connections in the IRP community.

Absences: If a member has missed two or more class sessions without notifying you, follow-up with an email or phone call to find out if there is anything amiss that is keeping the member from attending the study group. If you are not able to resolve the situation, notify the IRP office.

Guests: Only registered IRP members are permitted to regularly attend study group sessions. Contact the office if you encounter problems in this area. Occasional guests may be allowed, with the permission of the coordinator.

Adds and Drops: Members are allowed to add and drop study groups during the first three weeks of the semester. You will be notified of any changes in your study group roster by the IRP office. Sometimes, however, members decide to leave a study group without officially notifying the office; if you think this may be the case, speak with the participant and/or let the office know.

(2) Ground Rules for Discussion:

Some of these points can be made just once and repeated only as necessary. Some would be good to repeat at each session. They are all designed to encourage vibrant discussion in a smoothly running session. PLEASE --

Silence your cell phone.

Raise your hand when you have something to say.

Wait until you are called on.

Do not expect to be called on every time you raise your hand.

Keep your hand down while someone is speaking.

Stick to the topic under discussion.

Be courteous and respectful of others' opinions. Don't personalize, label or stereotype.

Avoid personal anecdotes.

Do not engage in side conversations.

Although you want an informal atmosphere, ***you are in charge***. Participants will expect you to ensure that others are courteous, allowed to speak, and are free to disagree (without being disagreeable).

(3) Participant Feedback:

Get feedback during the third or fourth week of the semester. You can use the Early Feedback Form distributed to coordinators by the Curriculum Committee, or you can create your own form. Experience has shown that the best response to the feedback form occurs when the form is handed out and collected during your study group session. Many coordinators reserve the last 10 minutes of the session for this purpose.

(4) Announcements:

Don't forget to make announcements, including IRP event announcements.

C. General Information

Audio/Visual. If you plan to use the classroom screen or audio equipment, check it out yourself in advance in the room your study group will use. Get help if you feel you need it. Many of your IRP colleagues can help. Some coordinators identify a study group member who can run the AV equipment for them. You can also check with the IRP office or with a member of the

Tech Committee. For the SPS (CUNY School of Professional Studies) classrooms, there is an on-site technology help office with tech support staff who can briefly explain the equipment or fix a malfunction. Technical training will be provided through workshops or other arrangements scheduled on a semester-by-semester basis.

Copying. Each IRP member has a \$150 allowance per semester for copying on New School copiers. You can use this benefit for your own convenience and you can remind participants that they can use it to copy materials that were downloaded from emails or the internet. Swipe your New School ID card on the printer to activate.

Library. The New School has online access to the NYU library. In addition, IRP members can use the NYU library to read, but not borrow, books. Help in accessing the NYU library is available from the New School library on the 8th floor of the 16th Street building. For online access, go to My.NewsSchool.edu and select “Access Campus Library Services”. Depending on the particular book, you can download, print and order books from the New School library, and to a more limited extent from the NYU library, through Library Services.

Jstor.org. The New School has online access to JSTOR, a valuable digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources. To access, go to the JSTOR login page and login via your institution (The New School) and then enter your New School ID and password. You can download and print from JSTOR.

Emergency Closings. Weather and other emergency closings are controlled by the university whose facilities are being used. IRP will attempt to email all members, but if you are unsure about class cancellations because of an emergency closing, check the university’s website.

Cancellation. If you must cancel a study group session, notify both the IRP office and your participants as soon as possible. A make-up session should be arranged, which normally would be in the 13th week. Check with the IRP office to make sure a classroom will be available.

III. HAVING A GOOD DISCUSSION

While study group content and coordinator style vary widely, in all cases, even those in which there is a significant lecture component, coordinators should seek an appropriate amount of participant discussion. These are some tips and “best practices” that coordinators have generally found to be helpful for generating discussion and helping participants, as a group, to feel they have had a good experience. If you are new to coordinating, you should take advantage of one of the “how to lead a discussion” workshops. The Curriculum Committee may ask one of the participants in your study group, who is an experienced coordinator, to be available to you as a resource.

In the first session, introduce yourself, your interest in the subject matter, and your objectives for the semester. Consider asking a few questions to involve participants in thinking about the general subject. For example, if you are discussing literature, ask what themes the participants

identified in the first reading; if history is your subject matter, you could ask participants what they know about the period or the subject.

If you are using power point slides as an organizational aid, aim for short bullet points that guide the discussion. Avoid narrative paragraphs and extracts from books. In general, do not read the slide to participants.

If you plan to encourage participant reports, bear in mind the following: The quality of the reports affects the quality of your study group; so, consider whether you want to ask a few participants in advance to prepare a particular presentation or whether you want to ask for volunteers on a particular subject. It is important to give clear directions about what you expect from participant reports. Participant presentations generally are five to ten minutes, but could be longer if the particular circumstances warrant.

Speak loudly enough for everyone. Ask participants to let you know if they are having trouble hearing you. If you tend to speak softly, consider using a microphone. Check with the IRP office for more information. If you generally sit at a desk, periodically standing up and walking around can be helpful.

For each session, prepare more material than you think you'll need, including a good set of discussion questions. The number of questions depends, of course on the nature of the material and the extent to which the subject matter calls for a lecture. The end result should be enough questions to pace the discussion through the material you want to cover, with some questions left over for the next session, or merely not used. Questions should be open ended and/or designed to bring out the content that you want to cover. But bear in mind the objective is discussion and not a subject matter test.

You control the discussion:

- Bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.
- Every study group has members who will dominate the discussion, if allowed. Create opportunities for everyone to speak, by, for example, calling on those who do not often raise their hands instead of those who frequently have something to say.
- Wait Time: Some people need more time than others to consider a response. A 5-second wait time will give them an opportunity to organize their thoughts. Do not always call on the first person to raise a hand.
- Encourage interactive discussions by asking participants if they agree or have a different perspective from original speaker.
- Let members know in advance that sometimes you may stop a discussion and go on to the next topic or question when the topic has been thoroughly explored and many participants have had an opportunity to speak.

- Bring closure to a discussion by summing up either as you go along or at the end of the session. At the end of a session, give some insight into your plan for the next session, including how assigned readings (or You Tube viewings) will be communicated.
- Do not hesitate to stop a discussion that is wandering into personal anecdote, pet peeves, or has become a side discussion among participants, or in other ways is inconsistent with IRP norms.
- Maintain a balance between the time needed by a participant to make a point and an excess of time taken by a participant who may wander off point or become repetitive. (We are all in IRP both as participants and coordinators, so we know this is not easy!).
- Guide the discussion by clarifying and summarizing as you go along.
- Remain neutral.

IV. EXAMPLES OF HOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CAN BE FORMULATED

Engage the class with open questions which ask for interpretations rather than facts. This allows for different perspectives. You might read a provocative viewpoint to the class, to break up groupthink and question their premises. Here are a few lines of questioning from different fields:

- Although we need to follow a historian's argument, consider whether biases or equivocations are reflected in what was included or omitted.
- A protagonist in a novel may win our sympathies, but is the character believable? How does the author achieve believability?
- We usually note when a play or book was written, but it is meaningful to ask how the time and place it came from colored the dialogue and points of view.
- It is fun to see how a film director used certain techniques, but even better if we consider just how they steer our response to the film's theme, events and characters.
- Supreme Court opinions on controversial subjects almost always have good reasons on both sides; which do you find most persuasive?
- Topics in science may not seem as open to discussion as topics in literature, film, politics and law, but greater understanding is often gained by discussion; break the concepts down and ask about the elements.
- Science often has significant implications for ourselves and our society. For example, is the survey data culturally biased? Does this "thought experiment" seem realistic?

V. PROBLEM SOLVING

The following chart presents “another take,” based on the above guidelines, on some common issues that may arise. Always feel free to contact a member of the Curriculum Committee who may be able to provide help and advice, or connect you with someone else who can.

Individuals who don't actively participate.	Bear in mind that it may take time for many participants to formulate a comment; so, wait a bit before calling on the “first responders.”
A few enthusiastic participants dominate the discussion.	Start by looking around at other participants: “Let’s hear from some folks who haven’t had a chance to speak yet.”
Someone puts forth information which you know to be false, or several participants begin debating the facts.	It is usually best to explain yourself or ask if any participants know the answer, and then move on. If you don’t know and it seems important, you can look it up for the next session or encourage participants to do that.
Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.	This may occur if you talk too much or do not give participants time to respond. It may help to pose a question and go around the group until everyone has a chance to speak. If the group isn’t coming to grips with the issue, try refining your questions to bring in additional points of view or “sub-issues.”
Tension or open conflict between participants who feel strongly.	Interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established the ground rules. You may need to talk “off-line” with particular individuals.

Everyone at the IRP wants you to succeed as a coordinator. Take advantage of the good will of the community as you embark upon the challenging and rewarding task of coordinating a study group. Many members have said that coordinating is the highlight of their IRP experience. We hope that will be true for you.